

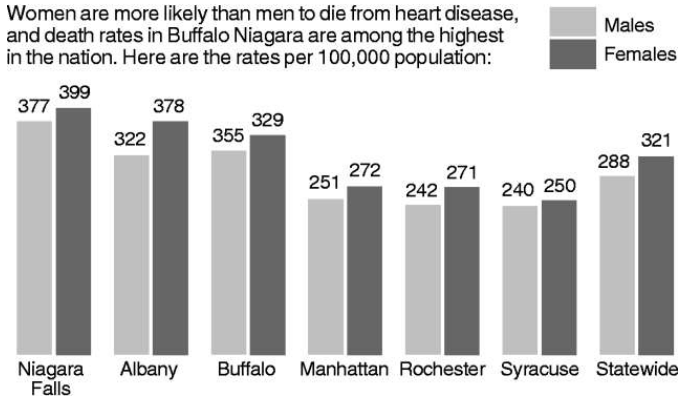
MEDICINE

Women's heart health is focus of campaign

By HENRY L. DAVIS
News Medical Reporter
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Matters of the heart

Women are more likely than men to die from heart disease, and death rates in Buffalo Niagara are among the highest in the nation. Here are the rates per 100,000 population:



SOURCE: The 2000 rates for metropolitan areas are from the Research Center for Stroke & Heart Disease, and are based on state vital statistics and data from the Statewide Planning and Research Cooperative System (SPARCS)

Roughly 505,000 women in the U.S. die each year from heart disease, more than men and twice as many as from every cancer combined, yet few women see heart disease as a serious threat.

It's not clear why they fare so poorly. Until recently, few studies included women as subjects.

But a growing body of research suggests that women often receive delayed or substandard care.

They are less likely to get proper tests in the emergency room to detect heart attacks, to get prescribed drugs to clear blocked arteries and to undergo procedures to identify clogged arteries.

The Buffalo Niagara region has some of the highest rates of heart disease in the nation.

New statistics show women in this region are 39 percent more likely to die of heart disease than the average American woman. Indeed, a woman in Niagara Falls is 50 percent more likely to die of heart disease than her neighbor in Rochester, according to data from the Research Center for Stroke and Heart Disease at Kaleida Health.

A host of organizations are launching a major campaign to raise awareness among women and doctors here, starting with a conference Thursday.

"We have a lot of talent in our area, but our rates of disease keep going up. We're doing something wrong. We're not applying that talent in the right way," said Gretchen Fierle, co-chairwoman of the Target the Heart Summit.

About 1 in 2.4 women in the United States will die of heart disease, but only 8 percent of U.S. women believe heart disease is their greatest health threat, according to a survey by the American Heart Association.

Most women continue to view cancer as the most serious health threat, even though heart disease is far more deadly. A woman's chance of dying of breast cancer, which kills about 42,000 women a year, is 1 in 29.

"Women have suffered from a conspiracy of ignorance," said Nancy Loving, co-founder and executive director of WomenHeart, the Washington, D.C.-based National Coalition for Women With Heart Disease.

In 2000, the most recent year of statistics available, heart disease killed 440,175 men. That's 65,265 fewer deaths than among women.

Dr. Nieca Goldberg, author of "Women Are Not Small Men," remembers how when she was in medical school it dawned on her that all medical care for heart disease was based on what was normal for a 165-pound man.

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Women's hearts and arteries are smaller than men's. The symptoms of heart disease and heart attack can differ between the sexes.

There isn't always a crushing pain that radiates to the shoulders and arms. The signs can be more subtle, such as shortness of breath, nausea, indigestion, stress and malaise.

"We need to focus on educating women about their risk factors, and getting the medical community to be more aggressive about recognizing the disease and caring for women," said Goldberg, chief of the cardiac rehabilitation and prevention center at Lenox Hill Hospital in Manhattan.

Veronica Etengoff, a retired sales representative, learned from experience that the best way to survive heart disease is to know the symptoms.

For five years, she popped antacids at her doctor's suggestion for the regular discomfort just below her ribs. She believed her problem was indigestion.

Then, one night late last year, she awoke with the terrifying chest pain of a heart attack. She went through a procedure to open a clogged artery around her heart, and now the burning sensation below her chest is gone.

"I can't help but wonder if my doctor overlooked something all those years because he thought I was just a hypochondriac woman," said Etengoff, 69, of North Tonawanda.

Evidence also suggests that many women and their doctors don't discuss heart disease during regular office visits. A 1997 survey by the American Heart Association found that only 30 percent of the women said their doctors had discussed heart disease with them.

Doctors may not be entirely to blame. Perhaps it's because women tend to live quietly with symptoms that men are more likely to talk about with their physicians, some experts said. The failure of women and their

doctors to tackle heart disease could also be a matter of communication styles, not neglect.

"A doctor can get to know someone but not really hear what they are saying," said Dr. Susan Graham, a Kaleida Health cardiologist. "This isn't about gender. People express pain differently. Sometimes doctor and patient talk to each other as though they are from two different cultures."

Studies also show that women tend to be 10 to 20 years older than men when heart attack symptoms arise.

One reason is that female hormones protect against heart disease before menopause. After menopause, which occurs around age 50, women's risk of heart disease increases. They also are more likely than men to die once disease progresses.

Consider that after a heart attack, the rate of having a second attack is 35 percent for women compared to 18 percent for men, according to the American Heart Association.

In addition to Loving and Goldberg, the summit at the Hyatt Regency Hotel will include Dr. Rose Marie Robertson, past president of the American Heart Association; Diane Becker, director of the Center for Health Promotion at Johns Hopkins University; and Dr. Frederick E. Munschauer III, co-director of the Research Center for Stroke and Heart Disease.

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