

# PANIC ATTACK OR HEART ATTACK

---



When a person experiences a panic attack, the body reacts by producing stress hormones. Symptoms such as chest pain, shortness of breath, rapid, pounding heartbeats (palpitations), sweating and a feeling of impending doom may occur. Transient burning in the chest, dizziness, weakness, nausea and severe indigestion along with a sense of panic are other common symptoms.

Both panic attack and heart attack have similar symptoms because they trigger the body's "fight or flight" response, but if symptoms last for more than 2-3 minutes or if the pain leaves and then returns, it could be heart disease. Only by having testing including an electrocardiogram will you know if the pain is coming from your heart.

## Diagnosing heart disease

Diagnosing heart disease in women is more difficult than in men. Symptoms can mimic a panic attack or can be more subtle. Many women have only mild chest discomfort ("pressure") or suffer severe indigestion with dizziness and weakness without any chest pain at all.

## Testing for heart disease

The routine diagnostic tool – the treadmill stress test -- is not entirely reliable for a man and is even less reliable for a woman. Research studies funded by the National Institutes of Health have demonstrated that the treadmill stress test gives false results in up to 40 per cent of women. Accuracy rates improve when the stress test is combined with imaging studies showing pictures of the heart using thallium (or some other low-dose radioisotope) or with sound wave imaging (ultrasound). While both nuclear imaging and ultrasound imaging are useful, women of child-bearing age may wish to avoid the nuclear testing due to exposure to radiation and opt simply for an exercise stress test with ultrasound. This gives results that are nearly as accurate as Thallium but without exposure to radiation. Any concerns about the testing should be discussed with your doctor. Finally, the "Gold Standard" for diagnosing heart disease with the most accuracy in both women and men is cardiac catheterization with angiography because it allows doctors to visually assess blood flow through the coronary arteries.

## Call 9-1-1 if you think you are having a heart attack

If you have chest pain, discomfort that lasts more than a few minutes, difficulty breathing or other symptoms which seem life-threatening, call 9-1-1. Treatment results are best for those who arrive in the emergency department shortly after symptoms begin. Newer tests can diagnose a heart attack more quickly and accurately.

## When in doubt, get your heart checked out

Heart disease is the number one killer of women age 35 and older. If you have any symptoms which cause you concern, see your doctor without delay and ask for testing to rule out heart disease.

Note: According to the Partnership for Women's Health at Columbia University, the best "first-line" test for a woman with symptoms and risk factors for heart disease is a stress test combined with an echocardiogram. Treadmill stress testing alone has as high as a 60% inaccuracy rate in women. Combining the stress test with imaging studies greatly improves the accuracy of test results in women, and it is non-invasive.

## HEALTHY HEARTS PROGRAM

Women's Heart Foundation, PO Box 7827, West Trenton, NJ 08628



[www.womensheart.org](http://www.womensheart.org)