

12 Women: a special case?

Widespread misconceptions persist about heart disease, often thought to be primarily a disease of middle-aged men. In reality, cardiovascular disease affects as many women as men, albeit at an older age. Many women still believe that they are more at risk from cancer than from heart disease.

Risk factors for CVD are similar for men and women, but tobacco use is more dangerous in women. In addition, high blood triglycerides are an important cause of atherosclerosis in young women, but not in young men. The menopause has no direct effect, but hormone replacement therapy increases the risk of CVD.

Heart disease is under-detected in women, particularly younger women. In developed countries, women are less likely to be referred to a heart specialist, to be hospitalized, to be prescribed medicine or invasive treatment, or to be referred for exercise testing or echocardiography. Women are more likely to enter the medical system with the diagnosis of a second heart attack.

After a first stroke, women are kept in hospital longer, and remain more disabled than men receiving similar care. More research is needed to improve our understanding of the differences in responses to treatment in men and women.

In the interim, however, adherence to the published guidelines for the prevention and control of heart disease and stroke seems prudent.



Heart disease and stroke kill as many women as men.

Risk factors

Modifiable risks – risk or prevalence is higher in women than men

- Tobacco use (higher risk)
- High triglyceride levels (higher risk)
- Diabetes (more prevalent)
- Obesity (more prevalent)
- Depression (more prevalent)

Modifiable risks – risk is similar in men and women

- High blood pressure
- High total cholesterol
- Low HDL-cholesterol
- Combined hyperlipidaemia
- Unhealthy diet
- Physical inactivity
- Stress

Risks for women only

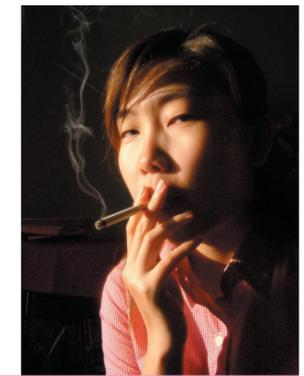
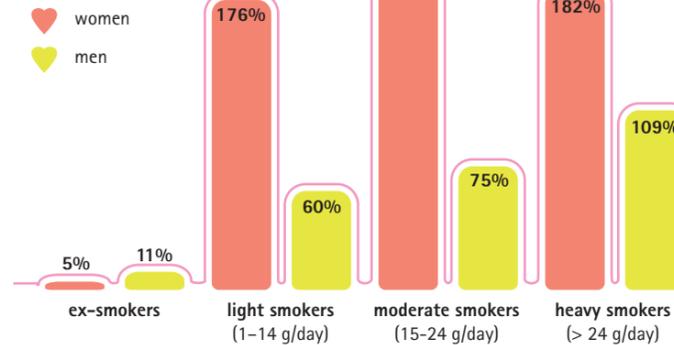
- Oral contraceptive use
- Hormone replacement therapy
- Polycystic ovary syndrome
- Risk of heart attack highest early in each menstrual cycle

Non-modifiable risks for men and women

- Advancing age
- Gender
- Heredity
- Ethnicity/race

Smoking

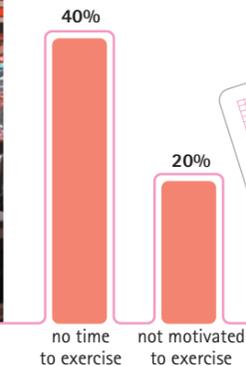
Percentage increase in risk of heart attack in people who smoke in Denmark 1976–1993



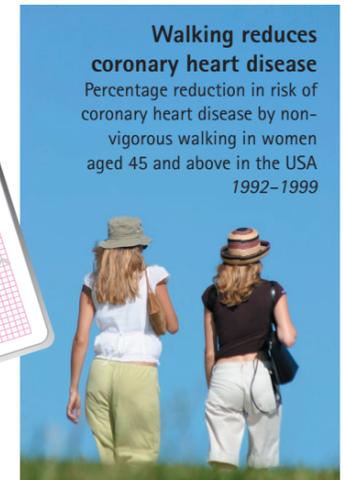
Women who smoke are at higher risk of heart attack than men who smoke.

No time to walk

Percentage of women in the United Kingdom aged 15 years and above who do not exercise more because of lack of time or motivation 2003



25% of women in the United Kingdom never exercise.



Walking reduces coronary heart disease
Percentage reduction in risk of coronary heart disease by non-vigorous walking in women aged 45 and above in the USA 1992–1999

Hormone replacement therapy

Percentage increase in risk of CVD in healthy women using HRT in the USA 1991–2000

