

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

1. How do I get the healthcare provider to listen to me if I come in through the emergency department or clinic with symptoms? They might not think my symptoms are heart-related and that I do not need to receive further testing to determine my exact diagnosis.

*This is a complex issue because there are so many structures in the chest (heart, lungs, esophagus, muscle, bones, cartilages, joints, fat, breast tissue), and each one of these can cause symptoms or discomfort. Heart testing is not always indicated based on the symptom, but we know that this is not a straightforward decision, and that women are more likely to be under-tested than men. Therefore, establishing a partnership with your healthcare provider is key.*

*Explain that you are concerned about your symptoms because you know women with heart disease can present in ways that are not exactly as described in textbooks. Provide precise details about the symptoms and duration. Help the provider understand your symptoms by providing pertinent comparisons that relate specifically to how you are feeling (for example: “I have never felt this way before” or “I have had heartburn before, but this feels different” or “I used to be able to do this activity without getting discomfort/ shortness of breath, but now I just cannot do it”, etc...). If you have risk factors for heart disease (including those female-specific risk factors, such as pre-eclampsia or premature menopause for example), or a family history of heart disease or stroke, this is a good time to bring it up. All of this information will be helpful to your healthcare provider in deciding the best course of action, in a partnership with you.*

2. I am overwhelmed. Too much information is being directed at me all at once. I do not know what to do first. How should I prioritize the action(s) I need to address my heart health?

*A good rule of thumb is (firstly) if there is a change in symptoms or a new symptom, to contact your family physician, or cardiologist, or go to the closest emergency room (if symptoms are severe or abrupt).*

*It is a good idea to seek support or guidance. For example through Cardiac Rehabilitation, patient guides, discharge instructions, pharmacists to review medications, etc. You can also look for credible online resources, such as the Canadian Women's Heart Health Centre's website (<http://yourheart.ca>) or the Heart & Stroke Foundation website (<https://www.heartandstroke.ca/women>). Another online resource for risk factor management is the Canadian Women's Heart Health Centre's Virtual Care Program (<https://pwc.ottawaheart.ca/programs-services/virtual-care>). In addition, in some locations you may find peer-support groups for women with cardiovascular disease. In Ottawa, the Women@Heart Program (<https://cwhhc.ottawaheart.ca/programs-and-services/womenheart-program>) provides peer-support to women with her disease, delivered by women with heart disease, in the community.*

*Educate yourself on your “numbers”. Take it one step at a time. Go through one risk factor at a time. For example, if your greatest risk factor is your blood sugar levels, you should connect with a local dietitian or consider changing your diet and/or exercise habits to improve it. As another example, if your main risk factor is high blood pressure, find out from your doctor what your goal blood pressure is, how often you should check it, and any lifestyle or medication therapies you need to reach that goal.*

*Again, be well informed, seek help when needed, and take it one step at a time! You will get there!*

3. Are there any community resources that I need to be aware of which will assist me with my heart health?

*The best way to inform yourself is to check in with your local hospital, clinic or health care centre. Most of these places provide free guides to help increase patient knowledge and understanding of heart health and heart disease. If there is a cardiac rehabilitation program in your local area, you could contact them as a first step.*

*You can find more information on women's heart health through websites such as the [Canadian Women's Heart Health Centre](#), the [Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada](#), and the [American Heart Association's "Go Red for Women"](#). Additionally, a publication well worth reading on the state of women's heart disease is [Heart and Stroke's Ms. Understood Report](#).*

4. How come my healthcare provider did not forewarn me that I was at risk? My risk factors were never assessed and explained to me. What could I have done?

*Unfortunately, I cannot comment specifically to what your risk factors were before, or why you feel you were not forewarned.*

*There are a variety of risk factors for cardiovascular disease. Some can be modified, and some cannot. It is best to be assessed, learn your current numbers, what these numbers mean and how these results can provide insight into your risk for cardiovascular disease. Take action through both active lifestyle change and medical management, such as medications.*

*It also helps to ask your healthcare provider how you are doing with regards to each risk factor: weight, exercise routine, diet, cholesterol levels, blood sugar levels, blood pressure, etc... That way, if you are due for a risk factor screening, this will serve as a reminder. It also empowers you to take charge of your own health.*

5. I had suspicious symptoms for a few years but my healthcare provider didn't think that they were heart-related. They thought my symptoms were related to something else, and I was treated for that until finally I had a heart event. What could I have done to have prevented this from happening?

*I am not a medical professional and cannot comment on your medical history. If you ever feel there is a change in your cardiac symptoms, contact your health care provider or go to the closest ER.*

*As of today, healthcare providers often practice based on what they have learned from their books and courses. However, traditional education materials are based on research done in men, and for this reason some healthcare providers may not yet realize that different symptoms in a woman could still be "the real deal". This is why it is important for women to know what heart symptom could be, so they can bring this to the attention of their healthcare providers and work together in identifying a diagnostic and treatment plan. This enhances this concept of 'partnership' with the healthcare provider, which is a great thing!*



*It is important that we know what our risk factors for cardiovascular disease are, know and understand our numbers, and how to manage them through active lifestyle change and medical management (such as medications). Take charge, and be your own advocate for your heart health!*