

LET'S TALK ABOUT: ALL WOMEN'S HEARTS MATTER

By Denise Johnson, Jericho Member

February is heart awareness month!

Did you know that heart disease is the leading cause of hospitalization and premature death for women in Canada and globally?

I did not know these facts myself until I started experiencing my own heart episodes. I was working full time in a demanding job, but enjoying the people and learning opportunities my position of leadership provided. I worked on having balance in my life by exercising, getting regular health check ups and surrounding myself with positive people.

After some minor surgery when I was home recovering, I started feeling pressure and discomfort around my heart. The pain and discomfort continued throughout the night, along with a rapidly increasing heart rate. I used every meditation and self calming strategy I had in my tool kit to try and think and breathe my symptoms away with no success. So the next morning I went to my local pharmacy to use one of their blood pressure machines. My blood pressure was highly elevated and I needed to go to ER.



After long hours of waiting at VGH emergency, a variety of medical tests were performed with no conclusive evidence of any heart related issues. The ER physician suggested I continue to monitor my symptoms and follow up with my GP. He also suggested that I might be experiencing anxiety which could be causing my symptoms. I knew what I was experiencing was physiological, but as this was my first episode I was unsure as to what it all meant.

Fortunately, I had a long standing working relationship with my GP who squeezed me into her schedule the following week. She listened to my story and reviewed the ER doctor's report. My GP trusted that I knew my own body and she believed me that there was a concern. What a difference this made for me to be

heard and believed!

She sent in a referral for me to have a stress test at UBC hospital. While running on the treadmill during the stress test, feeling great, suddenly I was rushed down to Urgent Care and hooked up to heart monitors. This resulted in an ambulance ride to VGH. I was told to prepare for having emergency open heart surgery that afternoon.



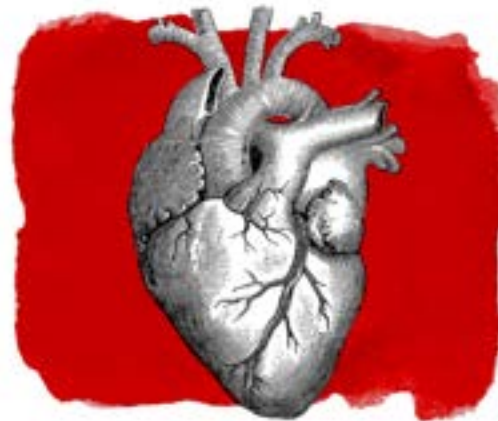
Once on the surgeon's operating table, a heart scope was inserted to view the heart muscle, arteries and connecting tissues. The surgeon was surprised at the limited plaque that was evident in my arteries and announced that my heart muscle appeared healthy and there was no evidence to suggest there were any blockages or tears in my arteries. He dismissed me from the surgical room and I was sent back to the Coronary Care ER unit. The attending cardiologist came to see me say there was no evidence of any heart issues and that perhaps I was having anxiety attacks and may want to see a counsellor. I was discharged with a note referring me back to my GP.

At this point, I did not know what to think and was living each day beginning to fear and waiting for a significant heart episode like a heart attack to occur. My GP continued to

trust my own self-awareness around my physical health and referred me to a new female cardiologist at UBC, who recently graduated from UCLA's Women's Heart Centre in LA.

This was the beginning of my happy ending to my heart health story. Having a cardiologist with expertise in the area of women's heart health was a true gift to me. I was properly diagnosed with microvascular disease (small vessel) coronary dysfunction, which is very common in women with heart disease. After receiving an accurate diagnosis, she was able to prescribe appropriate medications and refer me to the VGH cardiac rehab clinic. As a result of all these appropriate interventions, I have learned how to live with heart disease and am managing my symptoms effectively with the help of my care providers.

I am unfortunately a typical example of how women with heart disease are very frequently misdiagnosed due to a lack of research, knowledge, medical training and general societal awareness and understanding of women's heart health.



Some important additional facts to know:

Heart disease is on the rise and is the leading cause of death for women worldwide.

Women can be at greater risk for heart disease than men. Heart attack symptoms are not recognized in over 50% of women.

Causes of heart disease can be different for women than men

What can we do to care for our hearts?

1. Be active. Keep moving
2. Eat a variety of nutritious foods
3. Manage stress
4. Live free from commercial tobacco and vaping
5. Limit alcohol and substance misuse
6. Get regular check ups (testing for blood sugar, cholesterol and blood pressure)

What can you do?

1. Start the conversation with women in your life. Knowledge is power and prevention is key.
2. Be self aware about your health. Your prevention plan can start now.

Advocate for women’s heart health and take part in the [Wear Red Canada day February 13, 2022](#) to help inform others about the risk and signs of heart disease.

Resources :

[Canadian Women’s Heart Health Centre](#)

www.ottawaheart.ca/coronary-artery-disease-patient-guide/about-heart-disease



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WEAR RED



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GET INVOLVED

-  Register for the **virtual 5K Event**
-  **Join our Facebook Group:**
facebook.com/groups/WearRedCanada
-  **Attend a local event** or the national online webinar
-  Light the town **Red**