



‘I’m only 33 —  
so why did I have a  
heart attack?’

Heart disease is the biggest killer of women in the UK today — yet many of us still assume it’s just men who are at risk. Here we reveal how to protect yourself from this potentially fatal condition — and a mother-of-two reveals how she nearly died from a heart attack, aged just 33

**M**ost women in their thirties or forties are more worried about cancer than heart disease. Yet, women are actually *four times* more likely to die from cardiac problems than from breast cancer. In 2004, one in six women and one in five men died from heart disease (including heart attacks) according to the Office for National Statistics. So why don't women see it as a major threat?

Ironically, part of the problem is women's own natural defences, says June Davison from the British Heart Foundation. "Women are largely protected throughout their lives by the hormone oestrogen, until they go through the menopause, so there are more young male sufferers of heart disease than women. But that's not to say it can't happen to women too."

After the menopause, women are almost at equal risk with men of developing heart disease, but they may be less likely to recognise the symptoms. This is because, although both sexes may actually experience the classic high-level warning signs of a heart attack (central chest pain, spreading down to the arms, neck or jaw area, along with breathlessness and feelings of nausea) women often suffer less severe symptoms.

A woman having a heart attack may only experience a dull ache or 'heavy' feeling in the chest area, sometimes spreading to the back or stomach, or she may feel

that she just has a bad case of indigestion. Women's arteries are smaller than men's so this could contribute to these different symptoms. Another reason could be the fact that men and women may have a different pain threshold, and so interpret feelings of pain and discomfort in different ways.

Davison says, "Women may not think their symptoms are that serious – and even choose to ignore them. Consequently, that means that women often arrive at casualty later than men. And the simple fact is, if you are suffering a heart attack, the quicker you receive proper medical attention the better the prognosis. Ultimately, the faster the blood flow is restored to your heart the less damage will be caused to your heart muscle."

So what actually causes heart disease? The main risk factor is smoking. "The chemicals in cigarettes cause a plaque-type substance to build up in the body's arteries, increasing your risk by tenfold," explains Davison. Other risk factors include being overweight, high cholesterol levels, diabetes, high blood pressure, inactive lifestyle and a genetic predisposition.

"The fact is, if your parents suffered from heart disease before the age of 55 for men, and 65 for women, you are at greater risk of developing it yourself. Add to that more lifestyle risk factors and the higher will be your chance of developing coronary heart disease."

**"Women are four times more likely to die from heart problems than breast cancer"**



**Juliet Birol, 33, had no idea she was having a heart attack when she felt unwell last year. The consequences were catastrophic – and almost fatal. Juliet is married**

**to Ibrahim, 43, a chef, and has a son, Dale, 13, and a daughter, Ayse, nine.**

"It was past midnight on a Friday night and I was feeling sick and tired as I drove along the motorway on my way to Cornwall for a family holiday. I had been suffering with a terrible toothache for several days and the pain had started to affect my neck. My husband Ibrahim

was beside me and our two children were asleep in the back of the car. Suddenly, I felt a tightening in my chest, which got worse and worse. It felt like I had a ton of bricks pressing on my ribcage.

"I felt absolutely awful, but my husband doesn't drive, so I had no choice but to struggle on. To be honest, I simply dismissed it as a tooth abscess and terrible indigestion. I had already been to see my GP and my dentist five days previously and that's what they had diagnosed – so I didn't give it any more thought. I certainly wasn't unduly worried.

"Looking back now, it seems unbelievable that I drove for five hours in the grip of a heart attack, one of a series that had started the week before, unbeknownst to me. I feel sick at the thought of what might have happened that night. It must be every mother's nightmare to

have your husband and children in the car and then to black out and lose control. At one point I remember veering towards the central reservation, but I caught myself and took a break at a service station to drink coffee and take more liquid Nurofen.

"Somehow, I got to Bodmin, where we were staying in a self-catering apartment. I went to bed and the next morning I got up to prepare a cooked breakfast for the family, but I felt too nauseous to eat and went back to bed.

### **A COMPLETE SHOCK**

"Later in the afternoon, I got up and went for a walk with my family, but I was still feeling utterly dreadful. I went for a nap and asked my friend, who was sharing our apartment, to wake me after three hours – luckily, as it turned out. When my friend shook me awake, I was ▷