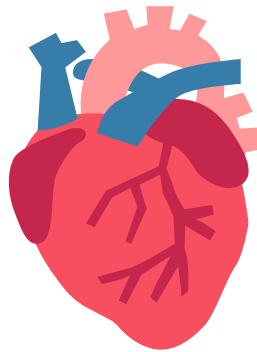




Cardiovascular Disease in Women

June 2026



Sources

The Canadian Women's Heart Health Alliance provides education, clinical resources, and advocacy focused on women's heart and vascular health (Canadian Women's Heart Health Alliance, n.d.).

Heart & Stroke provides Canadian information on heart disease, stroke, prevention, healthy living, risk factors, and tools to help people understand and manage their risk (Heart & Stroke, n.d.-a).

The Government of Canada provides public health information on women's heart health, including information about cardiovascular disease risk factors and sex- and gender-related differences in heart health (Public Health Agency of Canada, n.d.).

Cardiovascular Disease in Women

Cardiovascular disease, or CVD, refers to diseases that affect the heart and blood vessels. It includes conditions such as coronary artery disease, heart attack, stroke, heart failure, and other vascular diseases (Heart & Stroke, n.d.-a).

Cardiovascular disease is a major health concern for women in Canada. Sex- and gender-specific differences can affect awareness, risk factors, symptom presentation, diagnosis, prognosis, and treatment. Because of these differences, heart disease in women may be under-recognized or diagnosed later than it should be (Canadian Women's Heart Health Alliance, n.d.; Public Health Agency of Canada, n.d.).

Heart disease and stroke can occur in women of all ages. Risk can also change across life stages, including menstruation, pregnancy, menopause, and post-menopause. Understanding these sex- and gender-specific risks is important for prevention, early diagnosis, and treatment (Heart & Stroke, n.d.-a; Public Health Agency of Canada, n.d.).

Symptoms in Women

Chest discomfort is still the most common symptom of acute coronary syndrome and heart attack in both women and men. However, women may describe chest symptoms differently, such as pressure, tightness, heaviness, burning, squeezing, or general discomfort rather than sharp “pain” (Canadian Women’s Heart Health Alliance, n.d.).

Women may also experience symptoms beyond chest discomfort. These can include shortness of breath, upper back discomfort, neck or jaw discomfort, shoulder or arm discomfort, nausea, indigestion-like symptoms, unusual fatigue, sweating, light-headedness, or a general feeling that something is wrong (Canadian Women’s Heart Health Alliance, n.d.; Heart & Stroke, n.d.-b).

Because these symptoms can be less obvious or may be mistaken for anxiety, indigestion, muscle pain, or fatigue, diagnosis and treatment can be delayed. Women who experience chest pain, chest pressure, shortness of breath, unexplained severe fatigue, or other possible heart attack symptoms should seek urgent medical care (Canadian Women’s Heart Health Alliance, n.d.; Heart & Stroke, n.d.-b).

Prevention

Prevention is a major part of heart and stroke health. Heart & Stroke states that 8 in 10 cases of premature heart disease and stroke are preventable through healthy lifestyle behaviours (Heart & Stroke, n.d.-a).

Small, consistent choices can support heart and brain health over time. These include eating a variety of fruits and vegetables, choosing whole grains and healthy proteins, limiting ultra-processed foods, staying physically active, avoiding tobacco, managing stress, getting enough sleep, and maintaining a healthy weight (Heart & Stroke, n.d.-a).

Heart & Stroke also provides a free Risk Screen tool that helps people understand their personal risk profile and identify steps they can take to manage their risk for heart disease and stroke (Heart & Stroke, n.d.-a).

Risk Factors for Heart Disease in Females

Some risk factors for cardiovascular disease affect both women and men. These include high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, smoking, physical inactivity, poor nutrition,

chronic stress, poor sleep, and family history of heart disease or stroke (Heart & Stroke, n.d.-a).

Some female-specific or female-predominant factors may also increase risk. These can include:

- Having a first period before age 12 or after age 15
- Irregular periods or polycystic ovary syndrome, also called PCOS
- Experiencing menopause before age 45
- Pregnancy complications, such as high blood pressure during pregnancy, preeclampsia, gestational diabetes, or preterm birth
- A family history of heart disease or stroke
- Autoimmune conditions that are more common in women
- Menopause and post-menopause changes

(Public Health Agency of Canada, n.d.; Heart & Stroke, n.d.-a)

Hormones and Heart Health

Hormones, especially estrogen, may play a role in heart and blood vessel health. Before menopause, estrogen is thought to help support blood vessel flexibility and may have protective effects on the cardiovascular system. After menopause, estrogen levels decline, and cardiovascular risk can increase (Public Health Agency of Canada, n.d.).

Some people use hormone therapy during menopause. The effect of hormone therapy on heart health depends on personal risk factors, age, time since menopause, medical history, and the type of therapy used. It is important to talk with a healthcare provider about the risks and benefits before starting hormone therapy (Public Health Agency of Canada, n.d.).

Resources

Canadian Women's Heart Health Alliance

The Canadian Women's Heart Health Alliance offers videos, infographics, webinars, multilingual materials, clinical tools, and other resources designed to support women's heart and vascular health (Canadian Women's Heart Health Alliance, n.d.).

Heart & Stroke Risk Screen

Heart & Stroke provides a free Risk Screen tool to help people understand and manage their personal risk for heart disease and stroke (Heart & Stroke, n.d.-a).

Emergency Reminder

If someone may be having a heart attack or stroke, call 911 immediately. Do not drive yourself to the hospital if you think you may be having a heart attack or stroke.

References

Canadian Women's Heart Health Alliance. (n.d.). *Resources*. Retrieved June 18, 2026, from <https://cwhhc.ottawaheart.ca/womens-heart-health/resources>

Heart & Stroke. (n.d.-a). *Healthy living*. Retrieved June 18, 2026, from <https://www.heartandstroke.ca/healthy-living>

Heart & Stroke. (n.d.-b). *Signs of a heart attack*. Retrieved June 18, 2026, from <https://www.heartandstroke.ca/heart-disease/signs-of-a-heart-attack>

Public Health Agency of Canada. (n.d.). *Women's Heart Health Month: What you should know*. Government of Canada. Retrieved June 18, 2026, from <https://www.canada.ca/>