

Women, a silent killer lurks

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FOR most patients, chest pain is a classic sign of a heart attack. But when Madam Lee suffered a heart attack last year, she did not experience this typical symptom.

Instead, the homemaker — who is in her 70s — recalled being overwhelmed by dizziness before breaking out into a cold sweat.

Alarmed by the sudden dizzy spell, she got her son to bring her to the hospital. True enough, it was a heart attack.

As Mdm Lee's experience shows, heart attack symptoms in women can appear very different from hallmark chest-related symptoms, according to cardiologists TODAY spoke to.

While the majority of heart attack patients experience pain, tightness or discomfort in the chest, women are more likely to experience symptoms which are not classically associated with a heart attack, said Dr Victor Lim, a senior consultant of the department of cardiology at the National Heart Centre Singapore.

Dizziness, which Mdm Lee experienced, is one such symptom. So are fatigue, breathlessness, nausea and even indigestion-like discomfort, added Dr Lim.

Associate Professor Lim Yean Teng, a consultant at Cardiology Associates at Mount Elizabeth Medical Centre, estimated that about one-third of patients — of which a larger percentage are elderly and female — may experience atypical symptoms during an attack.



“A possible reason is that women suffer from heart attacks at an older age than men. Because of the physiology of ageing, chest pain may not be as intense as that in younger patients and other atypical symptoms may be predominant during an attack,” explained Assoc Prof Lim, who is also the adjunct associate professor of the department of medicine at the National University of Singapore.

Because symptoms may be elusive or unspecific, they can be dismissed as insignificant or go unrecognised.

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In fact, according to Dr Goh Ping Ping, spokesperson and medical director of Singapore Heart Foundation's Go Red For Women, studies have shown that up to a third of heart attacks can go unrecognised in women, compared to one quarter in men.

“One of the major criteria for heart attack diagnosis is central chest pain lasting more than 20 to 30 minutes.

“If the other symptoms are presented, doctors are less likely to consider a heart

CALM BEFORE THE STORM

Can you tell if you are going to suffer a heart attack?

According to Dr Victor Lim of the National Heart Centre Singapore, heart attacks often occur “out of the blue” without any obvious preceding symptoms. “However, in some patients, they may notice increasing frequency or severity of certain symptoms, such as chest pains on exertion or even at rest. In others, they may feel more breathless than usual while doing their normal daily activities.”

attack as the diagnosis,” explained Assoc Prof Lim.

“Sometimes, a heart attack can also be confused with indigestion or an anxiety attack,” added Dr Goh.

So, when is it the right time to seek medical attention?

“If the patient has known risk factors of coronary heart disease (such as diabetes, hypertension, high cholesterol or smoking), and they feel persistently unwell with the symptoms mentioned above, it is often better to err on the side of caution and see a doctor for a more detailed evaluation,” said Dr Lim.

“A simple ECG can often help to diagnose a heart attack even if the symptoms are non-specific.”

In Mdm Lee's case, rather than dismissing her dizzy spell, her vigilance and prompt action have helped save her life.