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Listen to your heart

When cardiovascular disease sneaked up on them, these three women faced the challenges head-on

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Quick: What's the No. 1 killer of women 20 and older?

If you answered anything other than heart disease, you're wrong.

Each year, heart disease kills more than 6,000 women in the 35-to-44 age range, and 10,000 women between the ages of 29 and 44 have a heart attack, according to the American Heart Association.

In recent years, both men and women ages 20 to 44 have been the fastest-growing users of prescription drug medicines to treat heart disease, according to a recent study by Medco Health Solutions.

But among women, things aren't improving. One recent study showed that in the past decade, the mortality rate from heart disease among women ages 35 to 44 has even been creeping up.

"It's probably the age-old issues with women and heart disease," says Cindy Adams, director of the Healthy Hearts Center at the Indiana Heart Hospital and a nurse practitioner. "The health-care system is more geared to pick up and treat men's disease."

But now a burgeoning field of research is focusing on the differences in heart disease between men and women. Stanford University, for instance, has just opened Women's Heart Health, a new clinic just for women with cardiovascular disease.

Closer to home, researchers like Dr. Daniel Meldrum of Indiana University School of Medicine are exploring why women's and men's hearts are so different. While they look the same, the way they respond after a heart attack or surgery is not all similar, says Meldrum.

"In the past, we would attribute any differences in cardiovascular disease to the hormone estrogen, but we now know that is not even close to the whole story," Meldrum wrote in an e-mail. "I think we are on the cusp of an explosion of information regarding how best to treat women following heart attacks and surgery."

Such information can't come too soon, experts say, given that women, especially young ones, often inexplicably do worse with common therapies and treatments.

Here are three women who discovered, to their shock, that they had heart disease.

Not one of these women had a known family history of heart disease. They all took their health seriously. And they all were shocked when they learned that they had heart disease before the age of 50.

Here's how they've fought back.

Cindy Springer, 50

Nothing about the pain in her arm signaled heart attack to Cindy Springer.

She had no risk factors, aside from elevated cholesterol, for which she was already taking medicine. She had normal blood pressure, had never smoked, exercised regularly and watched what she ate.

But the aching in her left arm persisted for a few weeks. One day while at work, Springer mentioned it to her husband on the phone.

Her husband didn't think it was serious either, but, still, he told her, "Go to Methodist." So the attorney enlisted her secretary to drive her to the Methodist emergency room that April day nearly two years ago.

As the two women sat there, Springer felt better and got up to leave. Her secretary said, "Oh, you're here already, why don't we go get you checked out."

That's the last thing she remembers. Soon after, she slumped down, unconscious.

Not only had she had a heart attack in which two of the three main arteries of her heart were completely blocked, but the lack of blood heading to that key organ had triggered the electrical system of the heart to go awry, causing a condition known as sudden cardiac arrest.

"It's usually called sudden cardiac death," Springer says now wryly.

But because she was seconds from help, Springer survived.

Even today, "why me" remains a mystery.

After the heart attack, Springer became diligent about her workout, exercising daily. Her doctors placed her on an array of cholesterol medicines.

A complete lipid profile also revealed that Springer had abnormally high levels of a substance called lipoprotein(a), which has been implicated in heart disease.

Now her two daughters, who are in their 20s, are considered at risk. They've both had their cholesterol levels checked, and one of them has started taking medicine to bring down her cholesterol and protect against heart disease.

Gina Jones, 45

Seven years ago, when Gina Jones started feeling fatigued and having difficulty breathing, both she and her doctor chalked it up to a flu-like illness.

But then one day, she felt dizzy. She got herself to bed and "that's when I felt someone was taking a rope and just trying to rip my heart out of my chest," she recalls.

Nine hours later, she awoke, confused and scared, thinking she might have had an asthma attack. She called friends and family but couldn't reach anyone, so she drove herself to the hospital.

A nurse there told Jones, then 39, she was having a heart attack.

Emergency angioplasty followed, and for a while Jones did all right. She remarried and stopped taking her cholesterol medicine, afraid it would prevent her from realizing her dream of having a child.

Then the artery that caused the problem in the first place "blocked like concrete," she says.

This time the doctors recommended open-heart surgery.

Now, four years later, the Downtown resident has completely changed her lifestyle to accommodate her heart disease. She's sought low-stress office jobs rather than more high-powered ones. She exercises regularly.

Most dramatic has been her approach to food.

"I used to go to the vending machine and eat any old thing," she says. "It became huge to me to know that this is more than food; this is something that can really block the rest of your arteries."

And she's become an avid volunteer, helping to get out the word about heart disease, among other efforts.

"This experience has led me into wanting to be more productive with the life I have now because I saw how easily my life could end," she says.

Melissa Oliver, 39

Like many women, Melissa Oliver had always figured heart disease was something she'd have to worry about when she got older.

Then she had a heart attack at age 35.

One day at work four years ago, Oliver felt an unusual pain in her chest.

When she went to her doctor, he downplayed her fears, but ordered a stress test just in case.

"I certainly didn't think it was my heart, but what else could it be?," says the Southside resident. "I didn't have time to be sick. I'm busy, I'm a mother."

She was shocked when her stress test revealed that she had had a heart attack. At first the cardiologist thought she might need open-heart surgery to repair her problems, which may have been congenital and exacerbated by her recent high blood pressure.

Instead, the doctor fixed her heart with four stents. After problems with the stents for eight months, Oliver's heart stabilized, but her life would never be the same.

She takes six medicines, has stopped long-distance running, eats sensibly and tries to be less high-strung.

"I want to do everything I possibly can to make sure I live a long life," she says.

The biggest challenge came as Oliver considered having a second child.

Her cardiologists didn't say no, but they warned her that they did not have much experience with women of child-bearing years and heart medicine. Oliver was pondering her next step when a close friend offered to carry a pregnancy for her.

"My girlfriend was very afraid that I would go ahead and try it and put my life at risk," Oliver recalls. "That was probably the best route for me to have another baby. . . . It was such an amazing miracle."

Eight months ago, Owen was born.

Call Star reporter Shari Rudavsky at (317) 444-6354.

LOWER YOUR RISK

For more ways to lower your heart disease risk, check out "The American Medical Association's Guide to Preventing and Treating Heart Disease" (Wiley, \$25.95). It offers tools and practical strategies for lifestyle changes, advice about warning signs to report to a doctor, guidance on heart-healthy ways to exercise and a section on unique risks and symptoms for women. The book also addresses the relationship between heart disease and dietary influences, such as cholesterol and sodium.

For events going on through February, or for more information, check out these sites:

Sister to Sister Foundation at www.sistertosister.org.

Women Heart, a National Coalition for Women with Heart Disease at www.womenheart.org.

The American Heart Association's Go Red for Women Campaign at www.goredforwomen.org.

-- Star report