



*Stacey Leitner, a heart attack survivor,
and her daughter Mackinley.*

STAYING HEART HEALTHY

Surprising News for Women

By Colette Connolly

In the early morning hours of July 4, 2012, Stacy Leitner found herself in a frightening situation. The then 39-year-old was nauseated, unable to breathe properly and within minutes was experiencing pain in her chest. After splashing cold water on her face, the Cortlandt Manor resident woke her husband, and together with their newborn, the couple made their way to the local emergency room.

By the time she had reached Hudson Valley Hospital Center, Leitner was suffering from severe jaw pain and was having a difficult time communicating

her symptoms to doctors. This otherwise healthy woman, who had given birth to a healthy girl two weeks before, had just suffered a heart attack, with blockages to both the right and left coronary arteries. Within days, Leitner was scheduled for open-heart triple by-pass surgery.

“I’ve always worked out and done the right thing as far as my health was concerned,” says Leitner, who admits to experiencing palpitations during her otherwise normal pregnancy, but “blew them off” as nothing to be concerned about.

NOT ALONE

As it turns out, Leitner is not alone. According to the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services' National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, one in four women in the United States will die of heart disease each year. Within six years of having a heart attack, approximately 46 percent of them will become disabled and two-thirds of them will fail to make a full recovery.

Coronary heart disease (CHD) is the most common type, but other forms of heart disease are just as deadly, including coronary microvascular disease (MVD) and broken heart syndrome, also known as stress-induced cardiomyopathy.

CHD is a disease in which plaque builds up on the inner walls of the coronary arteries, which typically carry oxygen-rich blood to the heart. Hardened arteries reduce the flow of blood to the heart, causing the chest pain that many heart attack sufferers experience. Coronary MVD affects the heart's tiny arteries, making them damaged or diseased.

A stroke, which is a blockage of the blood vessels that supply blood to the brain, is a higher risk to older women, especially those ages 55 to 79, who are often recommended by their doctors to take one aspirin a day.

MORE DEADLY THAN BREAST CANCER

Despite popular belief, heart disease is in fact more deadly than breast cancer, an illness that often gets more publicity, especially in the United States where national breast cancer organizations tend to receive substantial financial support from corporate sponsorships.

That might explain why, according to the American Heart Association, only one in five American women are aware of the threat of cardiovascular disease, with many of them failing to recognize that it could be their greatest health threat of all.

The symptoms of heart disease in women are very different from that of men, many of them frequently misunderstood. For women approaching midlife, especially, understanding the symptoms and dangers is particularly important, because once a woman reaches menopause, her risk is increasingly higher, say experts.

But that doesn't explain Leitner's heart attack at an early age or that of Fairfield County resident Nancy Capelle who, at 40, suffered a heart attack and subsequent cardiac arrest that left her dead for a brief time.

Unlike Leitner, whose heart attack was diagnosed in part due to the long-delayed result of radiation treatment she'd received at age 19 for Hodgkin's disease, Capelle's heart attack was caused by a spontaneous coronary artery dissection (SCAD), a rare condition that seems to affect younger women and involves a spontaneous tearing in the coronary artery wall.

GAINS IN RESEARCH FOR WOMEN

According to Linda Cuomo, M.D., an interventional cardiologist and acting director of the Coronary Care Unit at Westchester Heart & Vascular at Westchester Medical Center, there's been a misconception that the problem is a "man's disease." For years, women were not included in early research trials nor were they screened and treated for heart disease, says Cuomo, who cared for Leitner.

Common risk factors such as high cholesterol and blood pressure were also unrecognized as a threat to women's health and, as a result, were not treated as aggressively. "Over the past one to two decades, there have been a lot of positive changes," says Cuomo, who specializes in the management of coronary artery disease with angioplasty. "Women are now included in more studies so that there is more evidence to guide physicians as to how to best treat them."

RISK FACTORS UNIQUE TO WOMEN

Personal awareness is of course the most sensible approach to staying healthy, says Cuomo, who established a fundraising and educational program at WMC four years ago called Girls' Night Out. Each year, the initiative brings 300 women together for a night of fun and shopping as well as opportunities for heart-related education and awareness.

"Genetics play a role, but there are certain risk factors unique to women, such as gestational diabetes, preeclampsia and polycystic ovarian syndrome, all of which increases their chance of developing heart disease," Cuomo explains.

Autoimmune diseases, such as Lupus, which is common in women, can also increase one's risk, in addition to other factors unique to them. They include menopausal hormone therapy and birth control pills. Smoking, high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol, obesity, physical inactivity, diabetes, stress and depression, increased alcohol consumption and sleep apnea are all cause for concern.

And for those like Capelle, such risks may never present themselves. "There was no history of heart disease in my family. In fact, my heart was the last organ I really thought I had to worry about."

Following her recovery, Capelle, a motivational speaker and the founder of the nonprofit Cardiac Companion, LLC, a service helping heart attack sufferers regain their focus and confidence following a heart attack or other cardiac event, was anxious to find answers.

She participated in a clinical study on SCAD by researchers at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn. The results show that hormones, particularly higher levels of estrogen, as well as genetic factors, may contribute to a patient's susceptibility. Capelle says that researchers don't

KNOW THE WARNING SIGNS

Cardiologist Linda Cuomo, M.D., an interventional cardiologist and acting director of the Coronary Care Unit at Westchester Heart & Vascular at Westchester Medical Center, says with heart attacks, "Women are much less likely to have typical symptoms such as crushing chest pressure or tightness, jaw pain, left arm pain and sweating."

She says women are advised to pay attention to symptoms such as "fatigue, nausea, abdominal pain and indigestion with or without chest pain." The difference in presenting symptoms can make it harder to diagnose heart attacks in women. Knowing the warning signs can be critical.



Linda Cuomo, M.D., explains symptoms of a heart attack can be very different for women and men.

know why estrogen may contribute to SCAD, although higher levels have been recorded in women who are either pregnant or taking birth control pills.

“Women, especially, should be aware of SCAD and the risk that they may have for it and the fact that there really is no way to predict it,” adds Capelle, a former corporate executive who now serves as a volunteer EMT with the Wilton Volunteer Ambulance Corps in Connecticut.

NUMBER ONE KILLER

Cuomo, who is closely involved with the American Heart Association’s Go Red for Women initiative, says that younger women should not assume they’re off the hook when it comes to the dangers of cardiovascular disease. “All women should be worried since it’s the number one killer for us. It’s important that they know this so they can live a heart healthy lifestyle when they are younger and control or prevent the risk factors for heart disease.”

That means exercising regularly, eating properly, managing stress, and knowing one’s numbers, meaning cholesterol levels, blood pressure readings and blood sugar rates, Cuomo notes.

For Leitner, the future is optimistic. While she’ll be taking medication for the rest of her life and will need to see her doctor on a regular basis for check-ups, she’s more than grateful to her daughter, Mackinley, for inadvertently saving her.

Turning what could have been a tragic circumstance into something incredibly positive for Capelle and those she comes in contact with is particularly empowering for this basic life support instructor.

And while there’s an uncertainty that comes with the condition, Capelle, who takes one aspirin a day to help lower her risk, says she has learned to take it in stride and to focus on helping others understand the risks of heart disease and to educate them on what to do if they believe they are having a heart attack.

“Having gone through an experience like this has made me more connected to that fine line between life and death,” says Capelle. “I believe there’s a reason why I survived and a reason I’m still here.”

Colette Connolly is a freelance writer based in Bronxville and a frequent contributor to Westchester Family.

LEARN MORE ...

Attend a heart healthy event in your area to learn more about what you can do to prevent heart disease.

Girls’ Night Out Event

Tappan Hill Mansion
81 Highland Ave., Tarrytown, NY
Feb. 6, 6 p.m.
Register at:
westchestermedicalcenter.com/gno

Westchester/Fairfield Go Red for Women

Luncheon & Learning Sessions
Hyatt Regency
1800 E. Putnam Ave., Old Greenwich, Conn.
May 30, 9 a.m. to 2 p.m.
Register at:
westfairgoredluncheon.heart.org



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JaneGoodrich.com
info@janegoodrich.com

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