

Heart disease: First Canadian survey shows women unaware of symptoms and risk factors

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A new survey, ordered by the University of Ottawa Heart Institute, shows that a majority of Canadian women lack knowledge of heart disease symptoms and risk factors, and that a significant proportion is even unaware of their own risk status. The findings underscore the opportunity for patient education and intervention regarding risk and prevention of heart disease.

Heart disease is a leading cause of morbidity and mortality in men and women. Our understanding of [heart disease](#) stems chiefly from [clinical trials](#) on men, but key features of the disease differ in women. Published in the *Canadian Journal of Cardiology* (CJC), the article shows findings from the first ever Canadian national survey of women that focuses on knowledge, perceptions, and lifestyle related to [heart health](#).

Undertaken in the spring of 2013, the cross-country investigation surveyed 1,654 women aged 25 and over. Results showed that just under half of women were able to name smoking as a risk factor of heart disease, and less than one-quarter named hypertension or high cholesterol. Surprisingly, fewer than half of all women surveyed knew the major symptoms of heart disease.

"Women are under-studied, under-diagnosed, and under-treated because of a lack of public and professional awareness of women's coronary risk," said Lisa McDonnell, lead author and Program Manager for the Canadian Women's Heart Health Centre at the Heart Institute. "The findings show that we absolutely need to increase awareness and knowledge, and to correct misperceptions concerning the incidence, prevalence, and significance of [cardiovascular disease](#) (CVD) among women and [health care providers](#)."

Furthermore, when it comes to being informed

about heart disease, the majority of women mentioned their preference on receiving information from their doctor, but just half reported that their doctor had discussed prevention and lifestyle with them during consultations.

Perception vs Reality

The survey also shows that women who are at the highest risk perceived themselves to be at a much lower risk. In a comparison of actual and perceived heart disease knowledge, 80% of women with a low knowledge score perceived that they were moderately or well informed.

Additionally, 35% of women with CVD viewed their event as only an episode that has now been treated, after which they resumed their pre-diagnosis lifestyle "Out of Sight, Out of Mind" phenomenon.

"As 65% of the women indicated that they had the greatest influence over their family's health, and identified themselves as the "heart keepers" of their families' heart health, ensuring that they have access to the right resources and appropriate treatment would have a positive impact on all Canadian families," concluded Lisa McDonnell.

The University of Ottawa Heart Institute will be launching the first Canadian Women's Heart Health Centre next Fall to address the disparities in diagnosis, treatment and ongoing care for [women](#) with heart disease. The Centre will help increase awareness, knowledge and will correct misconceptions. It will support primary care providers with preventive care model and will develop a network of leadership and knowledge-providers

Provided by University of Ottawa

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