



Matters of the Heart

By Christina Fernandez

When we think of heart disease, most of us probably conjure up images such as a middle-aged, stressed out investment banker in a pinstripe suit. Or maybe some chain-smoking, overweight bloke. Here's a shocking fact: heart disease kills more women than men.

Najma Al Ansari is a woman who is all too aware that heart disease can strike both genders. Not only two of her brothers but also her mother have had open heart surgery. At 51 years old, Najma has had three balloon procedures (in which a tiny balloon is inserted into an artery to remove blockage) and a stent has been inserted into one of her arteries to keep it open.

"The balloon procedure was terrible," Najma says. "It was extremely painful in my chest." It was so bad that she cried and begged not to have the second balloon procedure after the first did not succeed. Eventually, she not only managed to get through the second but even braved a third procedure, which finally delivered results.

"The nurses where so happy that it worked, they were kissing me and the doctors where congratulating me," Najma recalls.

Five years later, the mother of five is taking three types of medication and exercising two to three hours a day.

"She works out a lot," confirms her son Ahmed. "When I wake up in the morning, she is already exercising with the TV on."

Najma was aware of the risks because of her family history. When her mother passed away five years after having open heart surgery, Najma collapsed in the hospital from the stress. She was diagnosed with high blood pressure there and then. Later on, she began having problems breathing when she exercised. She went to the doctor and was told one of her arteries was 80 per cent blocked.

Even before she found out about her own heart problems, Najma was working out a lot and watching her nutrition. "I saw how much my mother and brothers suffered with their open heart surgeries," she says. "I wanted to do everything to

make sure that it would not happen to me."

Despite her efforts, genes got the better of Najma. But fortunately, she has been doing well since her procedures five years ago.

"I have a full exam every six months," Najma says. "They put me on a treadmill and everything. Until now I'm okay, alhamdulillah."

Najma was diagnosed with heart problems quickly because her doctor knew her family history. Many other women have to navigate a more difficult path to the correct diagnosis because stereotyping of heart disease being a man's issue is not limited to the general public; it's prevalent in medical circles as well. As a result, heart attacks in women are under-diagnosed and mistreated.

"Heart disease has often been unrecognised in women because the medical community thought women were protected against heart disease by certain hormones," explains a consultant cardiologist from a local hospital in Bahrain.

When a man complains of chest pain, his heart is likely to be one of the first areas in his body to be checked. Women, on the other hand, are often told that palpitations they experience are just stress and chest pain is probably gas.

This lack of awareness is further complicated by the fact that symptoms of heart attacks differ between women and men. Although women may



Najma and Ahmed Al Ansari

suffer from the typical chest pain, they may also experience back pain, abdominal pain, nausea or fatigue. This makes it more difficult for doctors to diagnose heart attacks in female patients.

Women are also under-represented in most medical trials and studies about heart disease. This is a problem because men and women respond differently to heart medication and some drugs may not be as effective for women.

Statistics are shocking. For example, in the US, although more women than men die of heart attacks, women only receive 33 per cent of angioplasties, stents and bypass surgeries; 28 per cent of implantable defibrillators and 36 per cent of open heart surgeries.

Also, the risk of complications from heart disease is higher in women. It is hardly surprising then, that 75 per cent of men survive a first heart attack whilst only 62 per cent of women do.

Although the medical community has been waking up to these problems in recent years, there's still a long way to go.

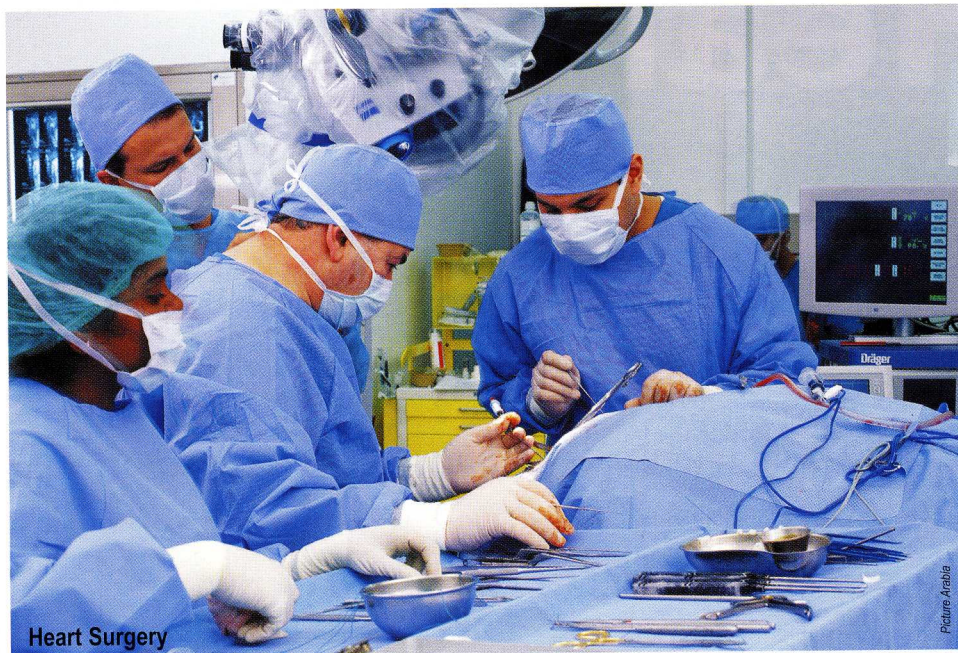
"I think it's still a problem," the local cardiologist says. "It's a worldwide problem and we are not different from the rest of the world. We are still working on it."

Because of the differences in men's and women's bodies, factors contributing to cardiovascular diseases and their treatments differ as well. For example, depression and smoking is much worse for women's hearts than for men's, but female ones also respond better to physical exercise than their male counterparts.

Coronary heart disease is a huge killer: worldwide, it causes more than seven million deaths per year. The main cause of death in Bahrain is cardiovascular disease, followed by cancer.

Heart disease is often caused by poor lifestyle choices, including eating unhealthy foods high in fat, sugar and sodium; lack of exercise; and smoking.

In Bahrain, all these risk factors come into play. Many people lead a sedentary lifestyle. Only



Heart Surgery

Picture Arabia



Exercise for the heart

Picture Arabia

12.7 per cent of men and 8.9 per cent of women exercise regularly, according to a 1997 study.

The Bahrain Global Youth Tobacco Survey carried out in 2003 found that 33.5 per cent of male and 11.9 per cent of female youngsters were smoking.

It's not looking much better on the obesity front: the 1998 National Nutrition Survey found that 23.3 per cent of men and 34.1 per cent of women in Bahrain are overweight.

"I want to give all people the advice to take care of their bodies and to get tested regularly," says Najma. "There are a lot of people in Bahrain who have heart problems."

Hers have at least had a positive side effect. Her son Ahmad, 18, was so shocked when he saw her suffer through her procedures five years ago, that he decided to become a doctor. He has been studying medicine in Lebanon for the past year.

Although it may not look like it at first glance, the fact that more often than not the risk of heart disease is down to people's behaviour is good news because this also means that we can do something to make sure our hearts are healthy. Proper nutrition, regular exercise and non-consumption of tobacco can go a long way. Don't just take the risks of heart disease quietly, get up and fight it!

START YOUR JOURNEY TO A HEALTHY HEART

If you have never had an EKG, cholesterol and blood sugar test, it's a good idea to see your doctor about them.

Above the age of 18, it is recommended that you get a cholesterol check every five years. You should also check sugar levels because many patients have already suffered from diabetes for many years by the time they are diagnosed. If you get tested, you can avoid complications such as heart disease.

Nutrition

As tasty a treat as they are, junk foods high in fat and salt are no good for your heart. Cut down on deep-fried foods, packaged snacks and margarine, which may contain trans-fats found in partially hydrogenated vegetable oils. Instead, look for polyunsaturated fats, which you can find in fatty fish such as salmon, nuts and sunflower oil as well as monounsaturated fats contained in foods such as olive, canola and peanut oil.

Avoid joining the fat-free bandwagon. Fat-free pretzels, cookies and cream cheese are high in calories but low in nutritional value.

Also, make sure you consume enough skimmed or low-fat milk products to keep your calcium intake high, as low calcium in the diet

appears to promote more calcium in the smooth muscle cells of your arteries, which can raise your blood pressure. If you prefer non-dairy find an appropriate alternative.

Finally, most packaged foods on Bahraini supermarket shelves have nutrition labels. Make sure you read these, to catch hidden unhealthy ingredients.

In some cases, it may be a good idea to see your doctor about nutrition advice.

Stress

As stress and depression is much worse for women's hearts than for men's, it's important that you take out a little time during the day to soothe yourself. Find something that works for you, whether it's meditating, reading or exercising.

Exercise

There's no way around it, you need to get up and move to keep your heart healthy.

"You need to exercise," says the local cardiologist. "And I'm not talking about the kind of exercise where you have your cell phone on and are talking as you do it."

Depending on whom you ask, different individuals and organisations recommend that you exercise a minimum of 20 to 30 minutes a day, three to five days a week.

You need to get your heart rate up to get a cardiovascular benefit, so make sure you exercise at 50 to 75 per cent of your maximum heart rate. This rate, or MHR, can be determined by subtracting your age from 220. So if you are 30 years old, your MHR is $220 - 30 = 190$ beats per minute. If you are exercising at 50 to 80 per cent of your MHR your heart should beat 95 to 143 times per minute.

You can determine your heart rate by buying a heart rate monitor to measure it or by taking your pulse for ten seconds in the middle of your exercise routine and then multiplying this number times six.

For those of you who find all this MHR business too complicated, there is also something called the "rate of perceived exertion". The scale, called the Borg scale goes from 1 (no exertion at all) to 20 (maximum exertion). You want to be somewhere around 12-14, so you feel that the exercise you are performing is somewhat hard, but you can continue. You need to feel challenged but not feel overly exhausted, faint or dizzy.

If you are having trouble keeping to these minimum exercise guidelines and feel like giving up, just remember that every little bit helps. Doing 10 minutes of exercise may not make as big an impact as 30, but it's still better than no exercise at all! Start slowly and then gradually expand your workout routine. Stick to a regime you can manage. And remember to have fun! **wtm**

6 sites for heart-healthy recipes and exercise tips:

1. www.cardiacnutrition.com (Cardiac Nutrition)
2. www.deliciousdecisions.org (American Heart Association)
3. www.womenheart.org (National Coalition for Women with Heart Disease)
4. www.nhlbi.nih.gov (National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute)
5. ww2.heartandstroke.ca (Heart & Stroke Foundation)
6. www.health-fitness-tips.com/ (Health & Fitness Tips)