



ESC Patient Forum member Mary Galbraith

Just something gastric? Why more awareness of the signs of heart disease in women is urgently needed.

When it comes to cardiovascular disease, women are under aware, under diagnosed, under treated and under supported.

Life took an unexpected turn for me when I was 39 years old. The prospect of having a heart attack just did not enter my head before that.

Under aware

One morning I was suddenly awakened by intense crushing central chest pain. I could hear my heart really thudding in my chest. The pain was coming in waves. It intensified, with pain then radiating down my left arm accompanied by pain between my shoulder blades, reflux, vomiting, hot and cold sweats. Did I think I was having a heart attack? No! I put it down to bad pre-menstrual tension or something gastric.

Eventually, after 3 hours I contacted NHS 24 for advice.

An ambulance arrived. My electrocardiogram was normal, and all my vitals were normal. Oxygen helped alleviate some of the symptoms, but clearly, I had displayed some classic symptoms of an acute coronary syndrome, but I was a young, relatively healthy female. I didn't quite fit the 'classic profile' of someone who might be having a heart attack. And, like so many other women when being unwell, I didn't want to make a fuss about it, even apologised to the paramedic and suggested to him it might just be gastric.

Assumption - "She's had a panic attack..."

The paramedic contacted our community hospital for further advice - but the doctor suggested that I had possibly had an anxiety/panic attack and said I could be left at home.

Luck on my side

Luckily, the paramedic overturned that decision and took me to hospital. After some blood tests, I was told, "We're treating you as if you've had a heart attack".

Four days later, another episode of intense crushing chest pain led me to an emergency transfer to a specialist hospital.

After some medical tests, I was diagnosed with a SCAD (spontaneous coronary artery dissection), a condition seen prevalently in women. I was lucky that my cardiologist knew about the condition and the best treatment option.



7 months later...

I had yet another heart episode. The presentation was more subtle and AGAIN I didn't pick up on the symptoms. How could I have missed another heart attack?

On-going chest pain

After a period off work and some cardiac rehabilitation, I was still having issues with on-going chest pain. I was told my SCADs had healed; my ejection fraction which tells how well my heart pumps had returned to normal. The electrocardiogram was normal. My blood pressure was stable. Cholesterol levels normal. I definitely had no blockages/narrowing in the arteries supplying my heart with blood. But I was STILL having chest pain.

I knew deep down there was something wrong. But the physicians suggested the root cause was anxiety.

A lifeline...

After several consultations with a cardiologist who truly listened and took my symptoms seriously, I was diagnosed with Microvascular Angina - another cardiovascular condition predominantly affecting women. This would not have been picked up in the 'normal' battery of cardiovascular tests. It took four years to get this diagnosis.

My message to women:

Be aware of ALL your risk factors and of the specific and non-specific symptoms of a heart attack. When you know something isn't right, don't delay seeking care and don't let anyone put you off. Be an advocate for your own health!