Cardiovascular Disease in Women: Facts and Statistics

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In 1992, cardiovascular disease was responsible for 950,000 deaths among Americans. More than 2 of every 5 deaths was the result of cardiovascular disease, and of the current United States population (about 250 million) more than 1 in 4 suffer from some form of cardiovascular disease. The average annual cost to the health care system is approximately US \$115 billion dollars. [Heart and Stroke Fact Statistics; American Heart Association, 1993, pp 1-18.]

Cardiovascular disease is not just a threat to the elderly. Approximately 170,000 cardiovascular deaths yearly (one-sixth of all deaths) occur among individuals less than 65 years of age. Nonetheless, as the average age of the United States population increases, a larger number of elderly patients with cardiovascular disease will emerge.

Although a decline in coronary heart disease death rates of approximately 25% was observed among women between 1979 and 1989, each year 250,000 deaths occur. Overall, cardiovascular disease is responsible for in excess of 500,000 deaths. In contrast, breast cancer claims about 43,000 women's lives each year, lung cancer claims another 49,000 lives.

One in 9 women aged 45-64 years has some form of cardiovascular disease. This ratio increases steadily to 1 in 3 at age 65 and beyond. An estimated 6,000 women under age 65 dies each year of acute myocardial infarction; more than 25% of them are under age 45. Among black women the statistics are even more alarming. The 1989 age-adjusted death rate for coronary heart disease was 28% higher for black women than for white women. From ages 35-84 years, the death rate from myocardial infarction is nearly 1.5 times that of white women. After age 85, death rates for white women are higher.

Clearly stated, cardiovascular disease is a major concern in women as well as in men. It is the leading cause of death for both. The only distinct difference between the sexes is not whether women can be afflicted by diseases of the heart and blood vessels, but when they will occur.