

Dr. Giesler's Blog

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Why Rosie's experience should be a wakeup call for women

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I'm hopeful that Rosie O'Donnell's blog post about her recent heart attack opens the eyes of Central Texas women about heart disease. All too often women think they have to experience the classic, "elephant sitting on my chest" crushing pain when they're having a heart attack. But the fact is, women often experience very different symptoms than men.

O'Donnell said she experienced flu-like symptoms and aches and pains in her arms and chest. While they're not the dramatic symptoms often portrayed on television or in the movies, they are the typical heart attack symptoms in women.

According to reports, she did a Google search on women's heart attack symptoms but didn't immediately seek medical attention. She did, however, recall a Bayer aspirin commercial and took one, something physicians advise people who suspect they're having a heart attack. Having regular, uncoated aspirin in the medicine cabinet is a good idea. In case of a heart attack, we recommend chewing and swallowing one tablet.

The former talk show host also made the potentially deadly mistake of waiting a day before seeking medical attention. By that time, doctors discovered her coronary artery was 99 percent blocked, and a cardiologist had to insert a stent, a small mesh device, into her artery to restore normal blood flow. Consistent with Rosie's response, only 48% of women surveyed in 2010 said they would call 911 if they thought they were having a heart attack. The failure of women to seek treatment is thought to contribute to the fact that 38% of women die within a year of a heart attack compared with 25% of men.

The American Heart Association lists the following heart attack symptoms for women:

- Uncomfortable pressure, squeezing, or pain in the center of your chest that lasts more than a few minutes, or comes and goes.
- Discomfort or pain in either or both arms, the back, neck, jaw or

stomach.

- Shortness of breath.
- Nausea, breaking out in a cold sweat, or lightheadedness.

Both men and women experience chest pain, however, the heart association says women are more likely to suffer other symptoms like shortness of breath, nausea and/or vomiting, and back and jaw pain.

Fortunately, heart disease is preventable. It's no secret that O'Donnell has struggled with her weight over the years. Obesity is a risk factor for heart disease and often reflects other unhealthy lifestyle choices such as poor diet and lack of exercise. Maintaining a healthy weight and keeping risk factors such as high cholesterol and high blood pressure under control are important. Knowing and controlling your numbers can significantly improve your risk of heart disease.

I applaud O'Donnell for sharing her heart attack story and hope women heed her advice to 'listen to that inner voice, the one we all so easily ignore.' We can learn from her experience: Know heart attack signs and symptoms, take an aspirin if you think you're having a heart attack, and CALL 911.

Comments closed

About the Writer



Dr. Caitlin Giesler received her medical degree from The University of Texas - Houston Medical School in Houston, TX. She completed her residency in Internal Medicine at the University of Cincinnati in Cincinnati, Ohio. She also completed her

fellowship in Cardiovascular Diseases at the University of Cincinnati. During her fellowship, Dr. Giesler pursued research on heart failure in women and the evaluation of cardiac biomarkers in hospitalized patients.

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