



## About heart disease and stroke media backgrounder

Heart disease and stroke is the leading cause of death for Canadian women. One in three Canadian women die of heart disease and stroke<sup>1</sup>.

Heart disease describes many heart conditions. Coronary artery disease is the most common of these conditions and occurs when blood vessels in the heart become blocked or narrowed, preventing oxygen-rich blood from reaching the heart. It can cause chest pain called angina or even a heart attack.

A stroke is a sudden loss of brain function, caused by the interruption of blood flow to the brain (ischemic stroke) or the rupture of blood vessels in the brain (hemorrhagic stroke). The interruption of blood flow or the rupture of blood vessels causes brain cells (neurons) in the affected area to die. The effects of a stroke depend on where the brain was injured, as well as how much damage occurred. A stroke can impact any number of areas including a person's ability to move, see, remember, speak, reason, and read and write.

In a small number of cases, stroke-like damage to the brain can occur when the heart stops (cardiac arrest). The longer the brain goes without oxygen and nutrients supplied by blood flow, the greater the risk of permanent brain damage.

### Warning signs

Thousands of Canadians die from heart attacks every year because they don't get medical treatment quickly enough. Learning to recognize the following signals of a heart attack can save a life:

- Chest pain or discomfort
- Pain in the arm, neck, jaw or back
- Difficulty breathing
- Nausea, indigestion and vomiting
- Sweating and or cool, clammy skin
- Fear – anxiety and denial

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Recognizing and responding immediately with emergency treatment can significantly improve survival and recovery from stroke. The five warning signs of stroke include:

- Sudden weakness or numbness
- Sudden trouble speaking
- Sudden vision problems
- Sudden severe headache
- Sudden dizziness

### **Risk factors**

By making simple lifestyle changes, women can reduce their risk of heart disease and stroke by as much as 80 per cent<sup>2</sup>. Risk factors for heart disease and stroke that can be controlled include:

- Smoking
- High blood cholesterol
- High blood pressure (hypertension)
- Diabetes
- Abdominal obesity
- Stress
- A lack of daily consumption of fruits
- A lack of daily consumption of vegetables
- A lack of daily exercise

Risk factors for heart disease and stroke that cannot be controlled include: age, family history and ethnicity.

### **Sources:**

1. *Investing in Canada's Future 2003-2004*, Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), 2004
2. *How to make sure the beat goes on protecting a woman's heart*, Johnson PA, Manson JE - *Circulation*, 2005; 111: e 28-33