

How Our Bodies React To Disease, According To Gender

By: [Providence Health Team](#)

We know certain environments, stimulants, and [situations](#) impact men and women differently, but did you know the effects of certain diseases also vary greatly depending on your sex? [Mehran Movassaghi, M.D.](#), a board-certified urologist at Providence St. John's, shares the stark contrasts, and often similarities, between prevalent diseases such as diabetes and heart disease and how they impact men and women.

Heart Disease

Men: "Men develop heart disease 10 to 15 years before women and are likely to die of it in the prime of life," says Dr. Movassaghi "When a male experiences a heart attack, it typically begins with the sudden rupture of a coronary artery filled with cholesterol and plaque, which then precipitates a blood clot."

Women: "Postmenopausal women are also subject to a sudden and unusual change in the shape of the [heart muscle](#) that occurs in response to severe emotional stress. Also called "broken heart syndrome," this condition is characterized by chest pain and changes in the heart's electrical activity that mimics a heart attack although the arteries appear clear of plaque." He continues, "Women are more likely to have a 'silent' heart attack, which has no overt symptoms at all. This variation may be due to women being older when the [heart attack](#) occurs, and also may be more likely if they have diabetes."

Both: "Heart disease is the most common cause of death for both men and women. Symptoms for both sexes generally include chest pain; upper body pain in the arms, back, neck and jaw; and shortness of breath," explains Movassaghi.

Stroke

Men: The likelihood of stroke is [higher in men](#), and men are more likely to recover after acute ischemic stroke than women. Almost 36 percent of women who experience a stroke are likely to be disabled after the event, compared to 24 percent of men.

Women: Each year about 425,000 women have a stroke almost 55,000 more than men. "This can be partly explained by women's longer average lifespan since advancing age is a key element in stroke risk," says Dr. Movassaghi. "Risk factors like these are unique to women, and others include the effects of birth control pills, [pregnancy](#), hormone therapy, and high blood fat levels – particularly prominent in menopausal women."

Both: "Many of the [risk factors for stroke](#) are the same for men and women, including a family history of stroke, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol," says Movassaghi.

Diabetes

Men: One study found that middle-aged men are at higher risk for diabetes because they tend to have a larger waist circumference and have less weight to gain than women. However, [another study](#) found that men were likely to be more active and more interested in modifying their lifestyle than women, decreasing their [risk factors for diabetes](#).

Women: Movassaghi says, “Researchers speculate that HDL, the ‘good’ cholesterol, is normally higher in women than men and may be behind the gender disparity. When you get diabetes, blood fats drive down HDL levels in women and the combination of blood fat and low HDL adds up to a greater risk of heart disease.”

Both: Both [men and women](#) at risk of or living with diabetes have similar symptoms such as urinating frequently, excessive thirst, and unexplained tiredness.

Pre-diabetes also affects both men and women. "Don't let the 'pre' in pre-diabetes fool you into thinking it's not a problem now," said Connie Dafoe Rueb, a clinical dietitian at Providence Alaska Medical Center in Anchorage. "According to the latest information from the [Centers of Disease Control and Prevention](#), 86 million Americans have pre-diabetes, which is one out of every three adults. Without managing your weight, increasing activity, and making healthier food choices many will develop type 2 diabetes within five years."

The reality is that there are many differences between the experiences of men and women related to disease. It's important to be aware of your family history and contact a health professional to [understand your risks](#).

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