



Cathy Keefe enjoys quality time with her daughter Erin, and son Sammy. She's on her way to making a full recovery from a sudden heart attack.

- fatigue
- not sleeping well
- shortness of breath
- pain that may be mistaken for heartburn.

Doctors believe that Keefe's heart attack occurred

WOMEN AND HEART DISEASE

Debunking a dangerous myth

WHEN CATHY KEEFE first noticed the tingling in her hands and feet, along with some shortness of breath, she wondered if her chest cold had progressed to pneumonia.

She and her 4-year-old daughter, Erin, finished their shopping at a local bookstore and Keefe called her husband, Dan. Since it was so close to Christmas, they decided she should try to see a doctor right away.

By the time she saw her doctor a few hours later, it was almost too late. As the doctor entered the room, Keefe remembers saying, "I think I'm going to pass out." She collapsed and the clinic staff immediately began CPR and called an ambulance.

Keefe, age 40 with no apparent risk factors for heart disease, had had a heart attack.

A perception that women—and especially young women—do not get heart disease is one of the most dangerous myths in health care.

Because of it, women may delay seeking medical attention. When they do seek care, there may be delays in diagnosis and treatment. The impact is staggering. The number of women who die from heart disease is far greater than the number who die from all forms of cancer combined.

Norma Thiessen, MD, a cardiologist with the Minneapolis Heart Institute who treated Keefe, believes that both women and their doctors need to take heart disease more seriously.

"Most women never imagine it could happen to them," she says. She advises women to talk with their doctors and learn about their risk factors. "Women should know their cholesterol level—not just the total number, but the level of each component." Other risk factors to discuss include family history, diet and exercise, tobacco use, diabetes and blood pressure.

Women's heart disease symptoms are often subtle. Thiessen says women should pay attention to unusual symptoms, including:

because of a genetic abnormality that affects blood clotting. She now has an implanted device that will restart her heart if she experiences a fatal arrhythmia (heart rhythm disturbance) that could result from a blood clot. She also takes medications and maintains a regular exercise schedule.

Now that Keefe is on her way to making a full recovery, she talks to her friends about heart disease and encourages them to take care of themselves. "But when I talk about my heart attack, I still feel like I'm talking about someone else," she says. ❖

Cardiovascular care tailored for women

Heart disease is not limited to men. One out of every three women will die from heart disease. The Women's Heart Health Program, developed by the Minneapolis Heart Institute at Abbott Northwestern Hospital, tailors care to meet the special needs of women. Services are available at Abbott Northwestern Hospital and at the Center for Outpatient Care in Edina, Minn. For more information, call 612-863-3900.