Could it be a heart attack?

On a television show or in a movie, a heart attack is often depicted as coming on suddenly. In reality, many heart attacks start slowly and involve warning signals.

While symptoms can occur abruptly, indicators can also happen slowly over hours, days, and even weeks as mild discomfort or pain that may come and go. The most common symptom of a heart attack is pain or discomfort in the center of the chest. It can be strong or mild, last a few minutes, or be intermittent.

Women should be aware of additional symptoms, however, as they are more likely than men to experience nausea or vomiting, shortness of breath, and pain in the back, neck, or jaw. Women are also more likely to die from a heart attack than men. One reason for this may be due to misdiagnosis, as women can experience the less common symptoms. Both women and men should understand that the symptoms of a second heart attack may be very different from the first.

Awareness of heart attack symptoms is crucial so medical care can be obtained immediately. Treatments for opening a clogged artery work best during the first hour of a heart attack.

If signs of a heart attack arise, do not delay medical attention because of a fear of overreacting. When the signs are present, seek medical help right away.

By the numbers

- Heart disease is the No. 1 cause of death for American women.
- Only 54 percent of women recognize that heart disease is their No. 1 killer.
- Of women who die suddenly from coronary heart disease, 64 percent have no previous symptoms.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s website.

Breast exams can save lives

There were more than 230,000 new cases of breast cancer for women (and more than 2,300 for men) in the United States in 2014, according to the National Cancer Institute. Breast cancer is the second most common type of cancer that women may face in their lifetime (about a 1 in 8 chance), topped only by skin cancer, according to the American Cancer Society.

Scheduling regular clinical breast exams (CBEs) and mammograms help detect breast cancer early. Women age 40 and older should get a mammogram and CBE every year, and women in their 20s and 30s should have a CBE at least every three years, according to the American Cancer Society.

Mammograms use an X-ray to look for unusual changes in the breasts. Almost all women will experience some changes in their breasts throughout their lives. Most changes are not cancer and are called “benign,” but only your doctor can make the diagnosis.

While mammograms can detect malignant tumors that cannot be identified by a CBE, not all cancers can be found from a mammogram alone. A doctor will likely use the X-ray results in combination with the CBE.

At any age, if you find breast cancer symptoms, such as a lump, change in size or shape, breast pain, or thickening of the skin of the breast, call your doctor. A medical professional can help you determine what is causing the symptom and establish a course of treatment if needed.
Recognize a stroke

Getting help for a stroke right away can prevent long-term effects and even death. Women in particular need to pay attention to stroke symptoms since the condition is the third most common cause of death for females.

A stroke (sometimes called a "brain attack") occurs when the brain does not get enough blood. It can happen quickly; symptoms include numbness or weakness on one side of the body, confusion, and trouble walking or speaking.

The American Heart Association suggests using the acronym F.A.S.T. as an easy way to recognize signs of a stroke in others:

Face – Check if one side of the face droops. Asking the person to smile will help you to see if one side is uneven.

Arms – Have the person raise both arms to see if one drifts downward. This means one arm is weak or numb.

Speech – Ask the person to repeat a simple phrase, like "The grass is green." Listen to hear if speech is slurred or difficult to understand.

Time – Call 911 right away if any of the signs above are observed. Take note of the time so you can tell medical staff when the symptoms first started.

While a stroke can happen to anyone at any age, the risk increases as a person gets older. For every 10 years over the age of 55, the risk doubles. Also, the risk doubles for a woman if someone in her immediate family has had a stroke.

Other factors increasing the chances of a stroke include smoking, high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, and atrial fibrillation (irregular heart beat). Hormonal changes during pregnancy, childbirth, and menopause also increase the risk of having a stroke.

Experts report that up to 80 percent of strokes can be prevented. Reduce your chances of a stroke by getting your blood pressure checked, testing cholesterol levels, screening for diabetes, and then working to get your numbers in a healthy range if necessary. Additionally you should maintain a healthy weight, limit alcohol consumption, and lower your stress levels.

Take care of your bones

Women are much more likely than men to develop osteoporosis. While 10 million Americans have osteoporosis, 80 percent of them are women, according to the National Osteoporosis Foundation. Osteoporosis is a disease of the bones that weakens the skeleton and causes bones to break easily.

Women with osteoporosis are likely to suffer from a broken hip, wrist, or spine (vertebrae). They may also have a curve in the back, sloping shoulders, height loss, stooped posture, and/or a protruding abdomen.

There are certain risk factors that increase the chances of developing osteoporosis. Since most women reach their peak bone mass development in their early twenties, those who did not develop a lot of bone mass early are more at risk. As a person ages, bone mass is lost quicker than it is generated.

Uncontrollable causes for osteoporosis include age, family history, and having a small, thin body (under 127 pounds). Controllable factors include being active, limiting alcohol consumption, eating healthy, and not smoking.

Women of all ages need to take care of their bones. Exercise and a diet rich in calcium and vitamin D are critical in building strong bones when you are young, and essential in maintaining bone density as you age. It is especially important for young women to build strong bones early; this is one of the best ways to prevent developing osteoporosis later. However, you can start taking steps to improve your bone health at any age.