

# Top killer of women often unrecognized

## Heart disease takes first place, killing more women than all cancers combined



[\(/staff/bradley-fikes/\)](#)

By [Bradley J. Fikes \(/staff/bradley-fikes/\)](#) | 2:56 p.m. Feb. 28, 2016



UCSD cardiologist Lori Daniels, left, talks with Beth Garcia about her heart attack. — UCSD

Certain diseases that disproportionately target women, such as breast cancer, get a lot of attention from medical researchers and the media. But the biggest killer of American women is the equal opportunity slayer called heart disease.

Just as heart attacks and related conditions are the leading cause of death among American men, heart disease tops the list for women. But much of the publicity surrounding this disease focuses on men. Women are left out of the picture, and the results are often deadly.

UC San Diego [recently re-interviewed](http://health.ucsd.edu/news/features/Pages/2016-01-11-heart-attacks-and-women.aspx) (<http://health.ucsd.edu/news/features/Pages/2016-01-11-heart-attacks-and-women.aspx>) an apparently healthy and active young mother the health system treated years ago for a heart attack. and shared the lessons learned.

Beth Garcia, then 41, at first didn't think her symptoms were heart-related. She experienced a sharp chest pain at a family dinner. The pains spread to her jaw and neck, and she became nauseous.

These are clear warning signs that a heart attack could be in progress. But because of her overall health and youth, and lacking risk factors such as smoking or a family history of heart disease -- and because of her wish not to disrupt the dinner -- Garcia delayed calling for help. She was diagnosed with an 85 percent blockage in one coronary artery.

Garcia recovered after receiving a coronary stent, [like the ones I recently received](http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/2016/feb/20/february-heart-month-my-experience/) (<http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/2016/feb/20/february-heart-month-my-experience/>). She also participated in a UCSD video cautioning women not to delay seeking care if heart attack symptoms appear. Besides the symptoms she experienced, other signs to look out for are heartburn, fatigue, and shortness of breath.

It's also important to know that both men and women may experience different mixtures of these symptoms, along with warning signs that a heart attack may be impending. The only way to know for sure is to get examined promptly.

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 64 percent of women who die suddenly of heart disease had no previous symptoms ([http://www.cdc.gov/dhdsdp/data\\_statistics/fact\\_sheets/fs\\_women\\_heart.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/dhdsdp/data_statistics/fact_sheets/fs_women_heart.htm)).

Moreover, heart disease kills more women than all forms of cancer combined. While a focused effort on cancer is welcome, heart disease merits an even bigger effort -- for men and women.

Some remarkably bold efforts are under way in San Diego. At the La Jolla Institute of Allergy & Immunology, researcher Klaus Ley is developing a vaccine to prevent heart attacks (<http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/2014/apr/02/klaus-ley-heart-disease-vaccine/>). The goal is to reduce the inflammation that causes coronary artery disease to progress.

And over at Scripps Health, cardiologist and genomics expert Eric Topol has led development of an experimental test (<http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/2012/mar/21/new-scripps-blood-test-forecasts-heart-attacks/>) to detect the short-term risk of having a heart attack.

If these and other efforts are proven to work in people and brought to market, heart disease may one day lose its deadly title.

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