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Abstract

Stress and Heart Disease: Focus on Women

Women have approximately a doubling of the rates of stress-related mental disorders such as depression and posttraumatic stress disorder compared with men, and have higher exposure to adversity beginning early in life than men. This psychosocial profile may disproportionately increase the risk of cardiometabolic conditions linked to stress, including coronary heart disease, among exposed women. In addition to having a higher prevalence of psychosocial stressors, women appear to be more vulnerable to the adverse effects of psychological stress on the risk of coronary heart disease. This vulnerability may be especially true for younger women. We hypothesize that exposures to stress beginning early in life may accelerate cardiovascular risk in women leading to early-onset coronary heart disease. I will illustrate the model of women with early-onset coronary heart disease to illuminate pathophysiological pathways of heart disease related to stress in women. Women's potential vulnerability to psychosocial stress could help explain female-specific cardiovascular risk mechanisms including propensity toward abnormal coronary vasomotion, inflammation and microvascular disease.