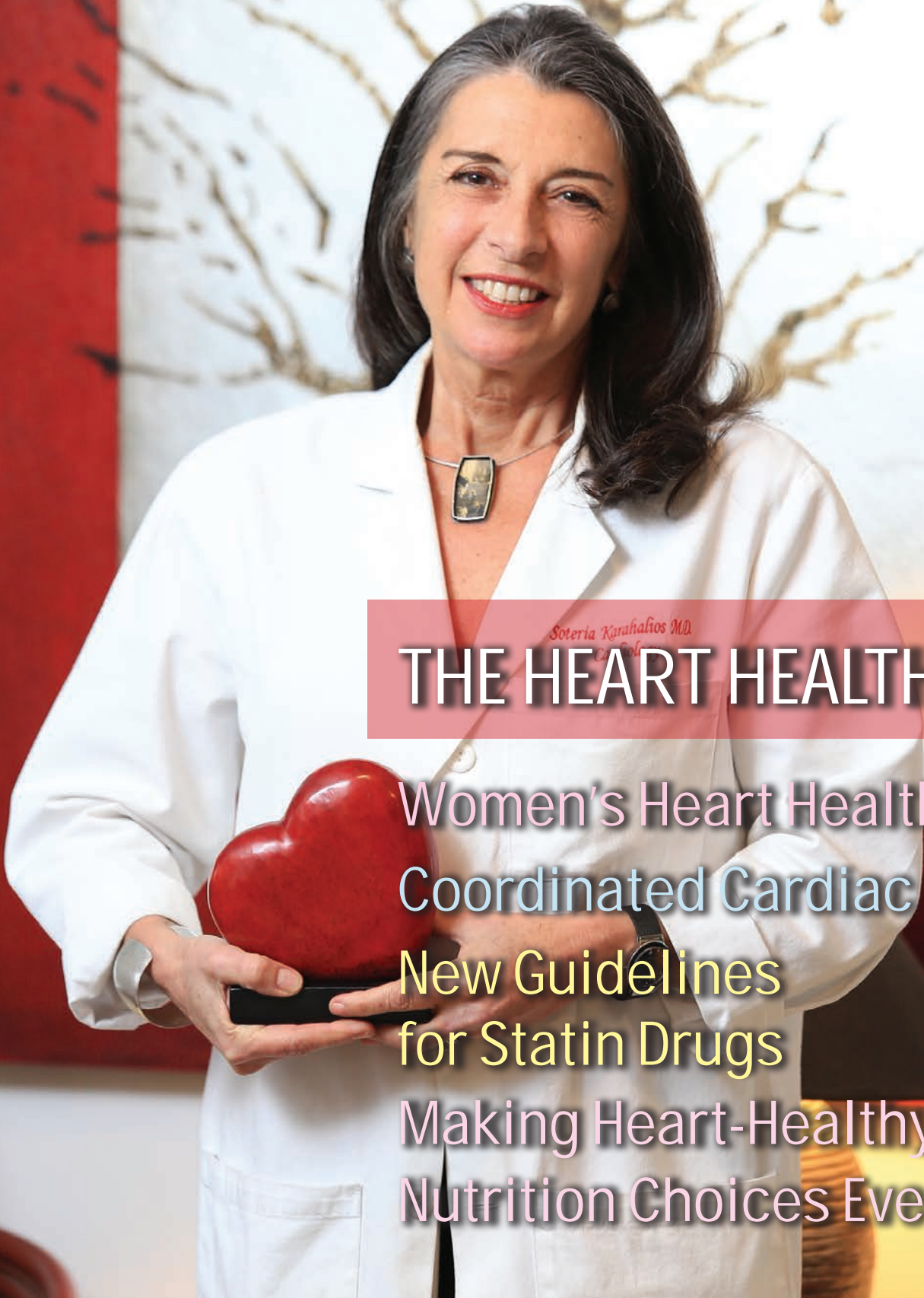


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Soteria Karahalios M.D.

THE HEART HEALTH ISSUE

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Coordinated Cardiac Care

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WOMEN & HEART DISEASE

Different Risks, Different Symptoms, Different Outcomes

By Kathryn McKenzie

IF YOU WERE ASKED WHAT DISEASE kills the most women in the United States, what would you guess? Breast cancer? Ovarian cancer?

Surprisingly, it's heart disease.

Few people seem to consider this a woman's problem, but the truth is that cardiovascular disease is the leading killer of women over age 25, according to the National Institutes for Health. It kills nearly twice as many women as all types of cancer, including breast cancer.

Now more attention is being paid to this problem, with February designated as Women's Heart Health Month.

For many years, heart disease in women was underreported, and research focused mainly on men, according to Soteria Karahalios, MD, founder and medical director of PRIMA Heart Preventative Cardiovascular Center and Institute in Monterey.

The focus is beginning to shift to the women's side. Heart disease is the leading cause of death for both men and women in the United States, but more women die from it than men do, says the NIH.

And women who undergo a coronary bypass are less likely to survive than men are, for reasons that still aren't well understood, says Ahmed Tarakji, MD, a cardiovascular and thoracic surgeon at Salinas Valley Memorial Healthcare System who is also a clinical assistant professor at Stanford University Medical Center.

"We're just starting to evaluate this," says Dr. Tarakji. "Likely there is a constellation of factors as opposed to only one factor that we can reverse. It is a much more violent and aggressive disease in women."

Women's risk for heart disease increases as estrogen production wanes, Dr. Karahalios says, with the greatest risk for women from middle age on. In addition, factors that affect both sexes are more likely to be present in women, who tend to have higher cholesterol, and are more obese and diabetic than their male counterparts.

Metabolic Syndrome

"Women are also more likely to have what's called metabolic syndrome," another risk factor for heart disease, notes Karahalios. Metabolic syndrome is a cluster of physical issues that include carrying excess fat in the abdomen, glucose intolerance, high blood pressure and high cholesterol.

Women also may develop cardiovascular disease differently than men do. Both sexes can develop atherosclerosis, or hardening of the arteries, in which calcium and fatty materials accumulate on the artery walls. Eventually this will block arteries, reducing blood flow to the heart and causing a heart attack.

But women are more likely to suffer from microvascular dysfunction, also called small vessel disease, in which the major arteries may look normal but smaller vessels are blocked, Karahalios says.

"It's a more diffuse disease and more difficult to identify," she notes. "Often there are poor outcomes because (women with it) aren't treated adequately."

Women's Heart Attack Symptoms

As if that weren't enough, women's heart attacks often present differently from men's. Men most often have the "classic" heart attack signs of tightness in the chest, arm pain and shortness of breath. Women may have other signs.

"Women can also have that gripping, squeezing pain, but they may have other symptoms, such as pain in the shoulder, neck and jaw pain, or heart palpitations, something that also happens as estrogen declines," says Karahalios. "It can be hard to sort out what's going on." She also notes that women are more likely to have a heart attack during daytime activities and times of stress.

Other heart attack symptoms more common to women than men are nausea, fatigue, indigestion, anxiety and dizziness — all of which can be misdiagnosed as being caused by something other than a cardiovascular concern.

"...women are more likely to have a heart attack during daytime activities and times of stress."

— Soteria Karahalios, MD

Because heart disease is now affecting women at younger ages, due to more obesity and diabetes in the population, the best defense is being evaluated and making lifestyle changes before any symptoms come to pass.

Karahalios founded PRIMA Heart in an effort to stop cardiovascular disease before it starts, by assessing patients for risk factors and then working with them to keep them heart-healthy for the rest of their lives.

Both Tarakji and Karahalios say that family history is one of the biggest risk factors — if female relatives had cardiovascular disease, other women in the family are more likely to as well.

Although genes can't be altered, other risk factors can be modified. Cholesterol, triglyceride levels, and blood pressure can be lowered through diet and medication, and exercise and overall fitness also assist in controlling these factors, and also helps with diabetes and weight management. In addition, smoking is also an

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Soteria Karahalios, MD, consults with a female patient about her heart health. Photo by Randy Tunnell

important risk factor, and women who smoke should quit.

Karahalios says that an assessment at PRIMA Heart includes a carefully detailed medical history and a battery of diagnostic tests, which are used to develop an individualized prevention program for the patient.

Other factors that are looked at are thyroid issues, estrogen deficiency — something that can occur because of early menopause or other factors — as well as life stress, which plays a more important role in women’s heart problems.

Tarakji feels strongly that the message needs to get out to women to take better care of themselves, and their hearts.

“We must raise awareness,” he says, pointing out that women are much more aware of breast cancer than they are of their risk of heart disease. “When you look at the numbers, it’s worth looking at.”

The good news is that exercise can go a long way toward improving heart health — both in men and women. Regular exercise can reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease by 50 percent, Karahalios says.

“The more you can incorporate into your daily life, the better,” says Karahalios, whether it’s dancing, swimming, walking with a friend, or climbing more stairs at work. “Make it enjoyable.” ■

Resources

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 Monterey Sports Center, 301 E. Franklin St., Monterey
 Ryan Ranch, 5 Lower Ragsdale Dr., Monterey
 333-1345, or visit www.primaheart.com

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 SVMHS Heart Center, 450 E. Romie Lane,
 Salinas,
 757-4333, www.svmh.com

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