

7th European Health Forum Gastein 2004
*"Global Challenges for Health
European Approaches and
Responsibilities"*



**Heart attack –
non for men only**

Media Information, October 8, 2004

Internationales Forum Gastein
Tauernplatz 1
A-5630 Bad Hofgastein

Dr. Carmen Kiefer
Media Relations

carmen.kiefer@sbg.at

Tel: +43 6432 26138

Mobile: +43 676 344 9971

Fax: +43 6432 26138

www.ehfg.org

Fax Presscenter:

+43 6432 20992

+43 6432 26056

Heart attack – that's for managers stumbling out of the private jet into business meetings and first-class restaurants...Nothing but a myth, claims the 7th European Health Forum Gastein (6th to 9th of October 2004) where the stethoscope scrutinises the heart of European women.

The experts of the EHFG finally dismiss two common cardiovascular myths:

Myth No. 1: The rich businessman is struck by a heart attack!

It is certainly not to be ruled out that the heart of the tuxedo-clad business executive fails to beat after an overdose of oysters and champagne. "This myth has been massively tinkered by the film industry: it is usually company directors, politicians and other influential people in films who suddenly reach for their heart and collapse.", explained Susanne Volqvartz of the Danish Heart Foundation. Fact is, however, that cardiovascular diseases strikingly more often afflict men and women of lower social strata. "In England, three times more unskilled than skilled men fall victim to diseases of the coronary vessel. This discrepancy has drastically increased throughout the last 20 years.", remarked David Byrne, EU-Commissioner for Health and Consumer protection, discussing the differences in health matters between the poor and the rich in Europe. "Remains to be said that women still lack equal education, have a lower income than men and are thus already disadvantaged", explained Volqvartz.

Myth No. 2: Heart attack is men's business

A further myth, stubbornly persisting not only amongst laypersons, is a male predominance in cardiovascular diseases. "These opinions emerge because men are usually afflicted ten years earlier than women. Men suffer from or die of the

disease when fully integrated in the labour market.", said Volqvartz. That is why there has always been permanent focus on the health of male hearts.

Coronary heart disease – the main cause of death for European women

To the contrary, Peggy Maguire of the European Institute of Women's Health in Dublin, stated: "Coronary heart disease is the leading cause of death as well as the major cause of serious illness and disability for European women. This is connected to the fact that women live, on average, six years longer than men do. More than one-third of women aged 55 to 64 and half of those over 75 are disabled from a heart disease.", That is of course a costly matter: "Disability costs the health system money and the afflicted their quality of life.", said Maguire. In Europe, 30 percent of the years lost by premature death can be accounted for cardiovascular disease.

Women fear cancer – but die of heart attack

Women still lack the awareness of being as much a risk group as men are. "A survey in Denmark showed that less than 10 percent of women believe that cardiovascular diseases are their largest health threat", reported Volyvartz. "Two thirds of the respondents believed breast cancer to be the largest threat." In fact, the odds are 1:4 – only ten percent of women fall ill with breast cancer, but 40 with cardiovascular diseases.

Female hearts are more stressed than male's during a working day

"During a working day women are more stressed than men. They have to work for more hours a day than their partners, as usually the lion's share of household work is additionally left to them.", discussed Volqvartz. A Swedish study demonstrated that this double stress can be proved physically: stress tests reveal that men have a high concentration of stress hormones at the beginning of their working day. This, however, lowers during the day and by the end of the working day is at a normal level. With women the stress hormone level is also high in the morning and lowers during the day, but at the end of the day it rises again because women prepare for their 'next job', the work at home. "A Danish study also confirms that women feel more stressed than men.", said Volqvartz. The living conditions described above do not make it easy for women to live healthy and take care of themselves. To the contrary: "What happens when stressed and overworked? Women light up an extra cigarette to create a little break in the long working day. They try to relieve themselves by eating fast food instead of healthy meals. In the evening they are too exhausted to feel a desire for jogging. They relax in front of the television and console themselves and the family with sweets and a coke.", describes Volqvartz. "Such behaviour almost breeds preconditions for cardiovascular diseases."

Female hearts beat differently

Things are looking bad not only for the unhealthy lifestyles of women, but also for research aimed at the female health. "Sad but true: we cannot answer some

of the most trivial questions on female heart health!", regrets Maguire. Most research for coronary heart disease has been conducted with men; for women, and especially older women, sufficient data is simply not available. "We do not know, for instance, how the hormones affect cholesterol levels; whether aspirin as heart medicine is as effective for women as for men; in how far diets affect men differently than women. Or how women are most effectively motivated to change their lifestyle."

Lack of prevention for women

The fact that not only one out of five European men but also European women dies of coronary heart disease, seems not to have penetrated every surgery. Male hearts are earlier and more thoroughly checked than females'. "Studies revealed that women are only half as likely as men to undergo cardiac testing, even when symptoms suggest heart problems.", says Maguire.

What can be done?

"The EU should bear a decisive role in research, and in the creation of more women and family friendly workplaces. A family policy that allows a healthier lifestyle should be established.", suggests Volqvartz. Maguire insists on closing the gap of knowledge concerning female heart health as soon as possible: "It is high time to conduct studies specially designed for women." She expects extensive health programmes funded by the EU which support research and the collection of comparable statistical data. Prevention has to be enforced, for instance, in the form of health promotion campaigns which inform the people about risks caused by smoking, obesity or lack of training. Such efforts would be even more effective if coordinated on European level. "The need of preventive strategies, diagnostic tests, reasonable treatment and rehabilitation policies for women are getting more urgent day by day." With an increasing percentage of older women in society, also incidences of coronary heart diseases will boost.

Figures and facts:

Medical background

- Smoking, cholesterol, high blood pressure, obesity, physical inactivity and negative stress are a risk for the male as well as female cardiovascular system.
- Women are better protected due to the hormone oestrogen – however, only until menopause. With increasing diabetes and blood pressure after menopause, also the risk of heart attack grows drastically.