

On television shows or in movies, heart attacks are often portrayed as painful, chest-clutching events. While this is sometimes the case, there are often less dramatic and lesser known symptoms that signal a major heart event is occurring.

A recent study published in [the journal Circulation](#) indicates that women may be more likely than men to experience these lesser-known acute heart attack symptoms in addition to chest pain.

For retired nurse Toni Piller, that's exactly what happened in August of 2007.

"When I actually had my little event, I never thought it was a heart attack," she recalled. "I can remember sitting in the emergency room after they had rushed me down there, after an EKG, saying to the emergency room doctor, 'what else can it be?' Because I really just didn't believe that I was having a heart attack."

Piller was working her shift at OSF HealthCare Saint Paul Medical Center in Mendota when her heart attack occurred. However, she didn't recognize her heart event for what it was, because her symptoms didn't fit what she thought were normal heart attack indicators.

"Mostly fatigue, I couldn't lay down, I had to sit up on the dining room table with pillows and kind of lean forward to breathe easier. It was just like the worst case of indigestion – more right sided, actually than left sided chest pain," said Piller.

Misinterpreting such heart attack symptoms could put women at a greater risk of death than men.

While knowing how to recognize the signs and symptoms of a heart attack is important, taking preventative measures, like regular checkups with your doctor, could keep you from suffering a cardiac event in the first place.

"I think that we need to actually ask our physicians point blank – because they go through a little list sometimes, you know, have you had your cholesterol checked, have you had your flu shot, have you had your colonoscopy, these different things, but we need to say – 'What are my heart disease risks?'" advised Piller.

If you feel like you are having a heart attack you should take an aspirin (162-365 mg) and call for an ambulance to take you to an emergency room. Do not try to drive yourself, and don't hesitate if you believe you are showing symptoms of a heart attack.

"After I had mine, when women would come in and say, 'I just have this vague pain, I've got jaw pain,' they'd say, 'I just feel really silly being here,' I would always try to say, 'Never feel silly for going to the emergency room or your doctor because you are the one who knows your body, and it's a matter of life and death sometimes,'" said Piller.

The following are both common and lesser-known signs and symptoms of a heart attack.

- **Chest pain or discomfort: This can feel painful, but also** like pressure, squeezing, fullness, burning, feeling a lump in the throat, a knot in the center of the chest, or an ache. It can range in severity and might also present as heartburn or indigestion.

- **Shortness of breath:** This could feel as if you ran a long distance even when you are at rest or engaging in light physical activity.
- **Pain or discomfort in the upper body:** This could present in one or both arms, the back, shoulders, neck, abdomen (if present above the belly button) or lower jaw, which could feel like a toothache.
- **Other signs of a heart attack** include breaking out into a cold sweat, nausea, vomiting, lightheadedness, weakness, loss of consciousness and fatigue.

The best ways of preventing a heart attack are to control your risk factors (high blood pressure, cholesterol levels, diabetes), stop smoking cigarettes, avoid using drugs like cocaine or methamphetamine, maintain a healthy weight, get regular exercise, and to not ignore symptoms.