

HEALTH

Come on girls, have a little heart

Nathan Rochford

Rochford is a journalism student at Holland College

Jillian Lewis sat at a blood pressure machine watching the dials turn waiting to see the outcome of her test.

For a 21-year-old nursing student this was routine.

The band around her arm started to loosen, and suddenly, like headlights flashing on, the numbers jumped onto the screen, 140 over 110.

High for a woman her age, she thought. But then again, she'd always remembered having high blood pressure, even as a kid. She figured it was normal and settled back into her chair.

"You should get that checked out," her instructor said, focusing on the screen. "Go to the clinic."

Not thinking much of it, she went that night to get checked.

The doctor couldn't pinpoint anything wrong, but referred her to a specialist just in case.

Three years and a handful of doctors later, Lewis was diagnosed with aortic stenosis, a narrowing of the aortic valve, which causes the heart rate and blood pressure to rise as the heart works harder to pump blood throughout the body.

Lewis, now 28, is one of thousands of Canadian women suffering from cardiovascular disease, a growing concern among physicians across the country.

In 2002, 34 per cent of all female deaths were caused by heart disease, two per cent higher than the total male deaths caused by the same thing.

Susan McConnell, a health promoter for the Canadian Heart and Stroke Foundation, attributes the higher death toll to women's symptoms appearing more vague than men's.

"Women often have vague chest pains, not the usual heart crushing pain that often a man will have," she said.

She also said women struggle with recovery while men recover easier and faster. "It's all to do with their physical makeup," she said. "Women's blood vessels are smaller than men's. There's not

as much room."

However, vague symptoms aren't the only problem for women dealing with heart disease.

Even in today's society women are the primary homemakers, which means taking time off of work outside of the home to exercise. Recovering from a major heart complication can become

difficult.

"It's not like they can just rest and decide 'Yes I'm going to do this,'" McConnell said. "It's hard just being able to take that time for themselves."

However, not all women have that problem.

Lewis, a mother of one, said there are a lot of things she can't do, but she still

manages to make time for herself.

"I can't do a lot of cardio, like run on treadmills, but I can swim and walk," she said. "Before I thought it was nothing. It made me more paranoid. You never know what is going to happen."

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