



Migraine Headaches and Heart Disease: Are They Connected?

Migraines may be more than just a severe headache. According to a Harvard Medical School study, a particular type of migraine may also be linked to an increased risk of heart problems.

Researchers found that women who experience migraine headaches with aura have double the risk of cardiovascular problems compared to women who are free from these headaches. Migraines with aura are intensely painful headaches that cause the sufferer to see spots or experience a “pins-and-needles” sensation in the arms or hands about 30 minutes before the onset of the headache.

Why Women?

Approximately 28 million people in the United States suffer from migraine headaches. Researchers typically work with women when studying migraines because women who experience these headaches outnumber men by about three to one.

During the study, Harvard researchers followed 27,840 female health profession-

als for an average of 10 years. Those who had migraines with aura were more than twice as likely to have heart attacks and strokes as those who did not. And they were more than twice as likely to die of cardiovascular disease.

According to Matthew Collins, D.O., a cardiologist with Holy Redeemer Health System, it’s not yet clear whether there is a direct “cause and effect” relationship between migraines and heart disease.

“It’s like the chicken or the egg—we can’t say yet whether these migraines are a direct cause of the heart problems or whether the headaches and heart disease are abnormalities that develop independently of each other,” says Dr. Collins.

“The Harvard study shows a very definitive link between the two, but there are still a lot of questions that need to be answered.”

One big question is whether treating migraines with aura will reduce the risk of heart problems. Much more research needs to be done before that question can be answered, according to Dr. Collins.

Ruling Out Stroke and Heart Attacks

One thing women who experience migraines don’t need to worry about, says Holy Redeemer cardiologist Bruno Manno, M.D., is that their headaches will bring on a stroke or heart attack.

“Nothing in the study showed that the two occur together or that a migraine with aura can immediately cause a stroke or heart attack,” he says.

Both Drs. Manno and Collins agree that additional research needs to be conducted in order to find out more about the causes and effects of these intense headaches and what their exact connection to cardiovascular disease may be.

“The advice we give women who experience migraines is the same advice we give everyone when it comes to preventing heart problems—don’t smoke, keep your blood pressure, cholesterol, and weight down, eat healthy, and exercise regularly,” says Dr. Manno. •