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**Heart disease: biggest killer of Australian women**

Australian women need to urgently educate themselves about the symptoms of heart disease as an average of 204 women die every week.

With the launch of Heart Week today (Sunday May 3) the statistics are sobering. Globally one in three women die from heart disease compared to one in 25 women who die from breast cancer, the biggest cancer killer of women.

According to Associate Professor Sally Dunwoodie, head of the Developmental Biology Division laboratory at the Victor Chang Cardiac Research Institute, women often miss or ignore the early warning signs.

"The first presentation of heart disease may be a massive heart attack or sudden death," she said.

"Heart disease has touched the lives of us all and most of us have a loved one or know a close female friend who has suffered from a heart attack or sudden death.

"Women generally put family first and are often too busy to seek medical attention for their symptoms or time out for exercise and relaxation.

"While men often present with classic symptoms of a heart attack, symptoms of heart disease in women are often less typical and can be attributed to other causes, such as stress," she said.

Cardiovascular disease is the No.1 killer in our community. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare there were 22,983 deaths from coronary artery disease in 2006, representing 17% of all deaths.

It is possible for a person's risk of heart disease to be lowered with 90% of Australian adults having at least one modifiable risk factor. Risk factors include being overweight (60 per cent of Australians), high blood cholesterol (51 per cent), high blood pressure (30 per cent) and smoking (20 per cent).

"The high prevalence of a fast-food diet, obesity and a sedentary lifestyle that we are seeing at present is going to result in a further increase in cardiovascular disease in the next 10 to 20 years and beyond," Associate Professor Dunwoodie said.

"We can't change the genetic risk factors that we are born with, but we can all modify lifestyle factors that affect the risk of developing cardiovascular diseases."

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**FURTHER INFORMATION: Louise Di Francesco Verve (0418) 617 869**