

Ex-patient crusades to warn others of heart disease in women

By Alicia Claussell-Nestle

Vilma Burgos led what many of us would consider to be a healthy lifestyle. She ate a low-fat diet full of veggies, fruit and lean meat. She was a runner as a teen and continued to exercise regularly throughout her adult life. But two weeks after her 50th birthday, Burgos had a heart attack.

"Having a heart condition was the farthest thing from my mind," said Burgos, who remembers her heart attack happening nine years, four months and 14 days before she did this interview. "It happened on a Monday. I got up that morning and was extremely tired. ... I went to work and ate some leftovers for dinner and I got heartburn from the food. I then went outside to cut the grass as I usually did on Mondays, but the only difference was that I was sweating profusely."

Burgos now understands that her fatigue, heartburn and sweating were all warning signs, but at the time she didn't understand what her body was trying to tell her.

"While women do present the typical signs of a heart attack, many women do not know that there are some non-typical symptoms like fatigue, anxiety or feelings of impending doom," said Gladys Velarde, a cardiologist and director of the Women's Heart Program at the Strong Heart and Vascular Center.

Burgos recalled that the heartburn and sweating worsened so she went to bed thinking she needed to rest. After an hour, she was awakened by her inability to breathe. "I've heard this said a million times, and for me it was true. It felt like a truck was sitting on my chest. It felt like my chest was caving in ... I knew something terrible was happening."

She underwent an angioplasty, a procedure that opens clogged blood vessels of the heart. Burgos had two stents inserted, which are tubes that keep the recently cleared arteries propped open. The treatment was successful. Now Burgos shares her story so other women can become aware and fight back against the No. 1 killer of women.

According to the American Heart Association, heart disease is the leading killer of Latinos, claiming more than 122,000 lives per year. And our mothers, abuelas, aunts and madrinas are especially susceptible because of a lack of knowledge surrounding heart disease.

In response to these alarming statistics, the Heart Association has initiated Go Red for Women, a national movement that brings women's heart health center stage. Locally, about 80 businesses participated in National Wear Red Day on Feb. 1. Companies invited their employees to "dress down and/or wear red" for a \$5 donation to the American Heart Association. In addition, the Convention Center, First Federal Building and George Eastman House were illuminated in red to raise awareness of women and heart disease.

"Heart disease and stroke are responsible for more than 32 percent of deaths in Hispanic females," said Libby Adessa, director of communications for the Rochester division of the American Heart Association. "Stroke is the No. 3 cause of death for Hispanic women, behind heart disease and cancer."

Why are Latinas particularly vulnerable? "It is a complicated answer," Velarde said. "Partly, it's lack of education [about the disease] and partly, it's cultural. Why Latinas have taken a backseat in learning about their risk factors is a situation that's typical of women in general. Our focus is on the family, children, parents ... The family unit is so important to Latinas that we put ourselves last."

It is a familiar scenario for Burgos. As the oldest of eight children and the mother of four, family life coupled with a demanding career led her to have increased levels of stress. "Stress is a risk factor that is difficult to measure. However, we know that stress causes the heart rate and the blood pressure to go up, which is not good for you," Velarde said.

Gerald Gacioch, chief of cardiology at Rochester General Hospital, said many health conditions may increase Latinos' risk of heart disease. "The biggest risk is inactivity, which leads to obesity. And obesity leads to type 2 diabetes."


Gacioch explains that the human body's blood vessels have a protective lining. High sugar levels damage the lining. "Whenever there is damage to the lining, that's when cholesterol seeps in and causes plaque to build up, which affects your circulation and leads to heart attack and stroke."

Smoking also causes damage to this protective lining. Gacioch adds, "Smoking is still more prevalent in the Latino population. If you smoke and have diabetes, it is the worst combination you can have."

Despite Burgos' efforts to lead a healthy life, there was one important risk factor she wasn't aware of — family history. "I couldn't understand why I had a heart attack. It was a mystery to me. That's when we started looking at family history. I come from a very large family, and whenever anyone died, we never really knew the details. We thought our family members were dying of cancer or old age, but discovered to our surprise that on both the maternal and paternal sides of the family, members died of heart disease."

While family history was an important risk factor in Burgos' case, Gacioch said that people who are genetically at risk of heart disease are in the minority. "The fact is that 90 percent of the cases of heart disease are preventable. Everyone hopes there's a pill out there to fix everything, but there isn't so you have to take control of the situation."



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Vilma Burgos led a healthy lifestyle. So why, at age 50, did she have a heart attack?

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Fatigue, heartburn and sweating were all warning signs of a heart attack, but at the time Burgos didn't understand what her body was trying to tell her.



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Burgos attends cardiac rehabilitation at ViaHealth on Ridge Road twice a week.



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