

Initiative alerts women to sneaky nature of heart disease

Women shop pink to support breast cancer research but don't realize that heart disease is the No. 1 killer of women.

In fact, more African-American women die every year from heart disease than from breast cancer, stroke and lung cancer combined. And while one in 11 women will have breast cancer, one in three women will have heart disease.

That's why St. Agnes HealthCare has launched A Sister's Heart, an initiative to bring attention to heart disease while offering education programs, seminars and health screenings.

A huge part of the problem is the insidious nature of heart disease in women. Dr. Carlos Ince, a cardiologist who is chief of the medical staff at St. Agnes Hospital, says men tend to have symptoms that he describes as "the Fred Sanford" syndrome, a reference to the TV comedy where Fred would grab his chest and stagger around, saying he was "having the big one." Men experience chest pain, shortness of breath and sweating, classic symptoms.

But women may simply feel tired and fatigued. They get fatigued when they walk or feel short of breath. They may wake up feeling tired. Some women do have chest pain, but others just have jaw pain or arm pain.

"It's a very nonspecific complaint," Dr. Ince says. "They just don't have the energy they used to."

Before the recent awareness of the difference, Dr. Ince says, "Doctors were looking for the Fred Sanford. Heart disease is picked up earlier in men and they get catheterized and revascularized, but women get sort of put off ... and then they show up in the ER with a massive heart attack." And, he adds, when it reaches that point, one out of every three will die.

David Simpkins, vice president for business development at St. Agnes Hospital, says A Sister's Heart grew out of Red Dress Sunday, which started four years ago and

targeted African-American women. They asked women in Baltimore churches to wear red to church the Sunday before Valentine's Day to make women aware of the dangers of heart disease.

"Women are much more focused on the health of their spouses and children than on themselves," Mr. Simpkins said.

This past February, more than 50 churches – some 100,000 women – participated, including Catholic parishes, such as St. Benedict, Baltimore.

"It was just a sea of red," Mr. Simpkins says.

But, he adds, "The feedback was that it was nice, but it's pretty episodic. We decided to build a larger initiative with activities throughout the year."

The good news, he adds, is that heart disease often is related to behavior and can be prevented.

For example, an American Heart Association grant will fund smoking cessation programs.

On Nov. 13 at 7 p.m., A Sister's Heart will sponsor a lecture entitled "From the Heart: What You Need to Know Now."

Throughout the year they'll offer heart health tips, and they'll continue to use churches to reach women.

"The strength of this whole initiative is the partnership we have with the faith-based communities," Mr. Simpkins says.

For more information, visit www.sistersheart.org