



## HEALTH REPORT

# I HAD A HEART ATTACK AT 25

One woman's story signals a larger issue: Heart attacks are often diagnosed based on men's symptoms, yet in the U.S., more women than men die of heart disease each year *By* KIERA AARON

**IT WAS A SATURDAY** like any other. Danielle Burgener spent the day at the zoo with her husband and 1-year-old son, happy to unwind after a long week overseeing the fitness program at a corporate gym in the suburbs of Los Angeles. It wasn't until she swallowed her nightly multivitamin that things started to get weird. "I felt an intense pressure on the center of my chest," says Burgener. "But I just thought the pill was stuck, so I drank some water and tried to go to sleep." Two hours later, a severe pain jolted Burgener out of bed. "It felt like a horn was puncturing my chest and going out through my back," she says. Still, she didn't go to the hospital for another 45 minutes.



Danielle Burgener today.

It never crossed her mind that she might be having a heart attack—why would it? She taught fitness classes three times a week, lifted weights, and had a spotless health record. Oh—and she was only 25. Not exactly a prime candidate for heart problems.

Apparently, doctors didn't think so, either. At first, physicians thought the chest pain was related to the vitamin, but X rays proved otherwise. No one could figure it out: EKGs were inconclusive. "The first cardiologist I saw actually apologized for some of the testing, saying that I was too young to have had a heart attack and that other people were just being overly cautious," Burgener explains. "He said I'd be on my way home soon." Then her blood tests came in, showing rising levels of troponin, a protein released when the heart has been damaged. At that point, the cardiologist returned to apologize again, this time because he had been wrong: She *had* experienced a heart attack.

The truth is, many women endure similar delays before being diagnosed with a heart attack. This is partly because the symptoms traditionally associated with heart attacks—clutching your chest, then collapsing from the pain—are more applicable to men. "The classic Hollywood heart attack represents two-thirds of heart attacks in men but less than half in women," explains Dr. C. Noel Bairey Merz, director of the Barbra Streisand Women's Heart Center at Cedars-Sinai's Heart Institute in Los Angeles, who later treated Burgener. "Women are more likely to have symptoms like fatigue, stomach pain, and nausea."

On top of that, the current testing methods are better at identifying heart attacks in men. "Men are more likely to have heart attacks caused by fatty plaque explosions and blood clots in major heart arteries, which result in more definitive EKG changes," explains Merz. Women, on the other hand, are more likely to have heart attacks that are harder to detect by EKG. These differences are compounded by the fact that women make up only 24 percent of subjects in all heart-related research. "We're still diagnosing heart attacks based on what we know about men," says Merz. "And that needs to change."

That's where the "Fight the Ladykiller" campaign comes in. In October, the Women's Heart Alliance launched the initiative to encourage women to get yearly heart checks, push for federal funding for research, and urge medical professionals to be more proactive in screening and educating women. (To find out more, visit [fighttheladykiller.org](http://fighttheladykiller.org).)

As for Burgener? Five and a half years later, at 31, she's finally starting to feel like her old self again: "I'm running for the first time since the heart attack, but I still take it easy," says Burgener, who emphasizes the importance of trusting yourself and knowing your body. If your doc thinks you're too young or fit for a heart check, then maybe it's time for a new doctor. **mc**