



Could your indigestion actually be heart disease?

By ANNA MAGEE FOR THE MAIL ON SUNDAY

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The stiff shoulder that turned out to be Parkinson's Disease. The women told their period pains were all in the mind - but who years later discovered they had endometriosis, which rendered them infertile. Serious medical mistakes - with potentially disastrous consequences.

Of all complaints received by the Care Quality Commission in 2008, 36 per cent related to misdiagnosis or delays in diagnoses by GPs.

In one study, which looked at 1,000 claims brought against GPs, two-thirds involved a delayed or wrong diagnosis, including misdiagnosing serious conditions such as heart disease and cancer.



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Katherine Murphy, director of the Patients' Association, said there is nothing worse for patients than a late or wrong diagnosis.

'When it goes wrong, the consequences are obvious, but the illness may not have been that difficult to diagnose,' she says.

'As gatekeepers to the rest of the NHS, a GP's duty to be up-to-date is absolute. The pressure on them is increasing: patients live longer and can have more done for them, but the standard consultation time is still only a few minutes.'

So, what might your doctor be missing? Here are seven conditions that are routinely misdiagnosed, and the red flag symptoms to look for.

ANGINA/HEART DISEASE IN WOMEN

Heart attacks are the leading cause of death in women in the UK. 'But because their symptoms are more subtle than men's, women are less likely to be diagnosed or receive adequate treatment,' says Professor TW Koh, consultant cardiologist at The London Clinic.

Women are also as likely as men to get angina - pain caused by a lack of blood to the heart muscle during increased exercise or exertion. This can be felt in several areas around the body and can be a precursor to a heart attack.

SYMPTOMS: Include a dull ache in the chest, feeling anxious or faint, breathlessness. They will almost always be intermittent and usually upon exertion. Professor Koh says: 'If your symptoms are after eating then it's likely to be indigestion. But if it is only happening during exertion, see a cardiologist.'

MISDIAGNOSIS: 'There is a tendency in women to have more subtle symptoms, such as feeling faint, breathless or nauseous, which can be interpreted by doctors as anything from indigestion to anaemia to not enough sleep,' says cardiologist Professor Peter Weissberg of the British Heart Foundation (BHF).

GET TESTED: The BHF recommends anyone over 40 have their blood pressure and cholesterol checked, particularly smokers, the sedentary or anyone with a close relative who had heart disease. 'The next step is referral to a cardiologist or chest pain clinic for an Exercise Stress Test, an electrocardiogram administered during physical exercise so doctors can see how your heart is performing,' says Prof Koh.



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