



Dr. Shaista Malik, a cardiologist at UCI Medical Center stands before images of angiograms. Malik says doctors are "starting to see women get heart disease at younger and younger ages."

PHOTOGRAPH BY CINDY YAMANAKA

DR. SHAISTA MALIK: DELIVERING ANSWERS TO WOMEN'S HEART-DISEASE QUESTIONS

BY LANDON HALL

Shaista Malik grew up in Anaheim, raised by a single mother. At 12, to help out with the bills, she and her younger brother started delivering the Register, flinging the rolled-up morning (and back then, evening) editions into driveways with one hand while steadying their bikes with the other.

Two relatives died in her family's home of heart problems: her mother's mother, who was 81 and had suffered ill health from heart disease for years; and an uncle who'd been staying with them for a time. He was only in his 50s and had a heart attack in the night. "We found him in the morning," Malik said.

She's now Dr. Shaista Malik, and as head of UC Irvine's Preventive Cardiology Program and Women's Heart Program, it's her job to figure out ways to teach men and women to avoid a heart attack, stroke or other debilitating cardiac event.

Much of her efforts, both in treating patients at UCI Medical

Center and in her research — the Stanford grad earned her Ph.D. in public health from UCLA, then went to med school at UCI — have been concentrated on preventing heart disease and on how it strikes women differently than men.

The two sexes have risk factors that overlap: Smoking, high blood pressure and high cholesterol strain the cardiovascular system no matter who you are. Half of people who suffer a heart attack had no previous symptoms, and about one-third of heart-attack victims die before reaching the hospital.

Women with heart disease generally are stricken about 10 years later than men, Malik says. "However, because of obesity rising in the population, diabetes rising in the population, we're starting to see women get heart disease at younger and younger age groups."

Certain factors play a bigger role in women's heart disease compared with men, including diabetes, stress and depression. After women go through menopause, reduced levels of

estrogen can pose a significant risk for disease in the smaller blood vessels, far from the heart.

Plaque deposits in these tiny vessels get missed by an EKG or angiogram. Often such patients are told they don't have heart disease at all. They're sent home, and they remain at risk.

The good news is that sophisticated testing, including CT imaging, can find buildups in hard-to-see places, including in the lining of arterial walls. "If you do the right things, get on the right treatment, you can actually reverse plaque," Malik said.

Doing the "right things" doesn't necessarily mean reinventing one's lifestyle. "Small changes can go a long way," she said. "With diet, in general, the more plant-based, the better for the heart. It doesn't mean you can never indulge yourself. It can be just simple things like not eating the potato chips with the sandwich and just being more mindful of what you're putting into your body."