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I Am Not the Face of a Heart Attack

What one Colorado mom thought was a heart attack was actually an uncommon heart condition—one that impacts women much more often than men. A Kaiser Permanente cardiologist explains.

BY KAISER PERMANENTE [[HTTPS://SPECIALTYCARECOLORADO.KAISERPERMANENTE.ORG/CARDIOLOGY/? UTM_SOURCE=5280&UTM_MEDIUM=NATIVE&UTM_CAMPAIGN=CARDIOLOGY](https://specialtycarecolorado.kaiserpermanente.org/cardiology/?utm_source=5280&utm_medium=native&utm_campaign=cardiology)]

What does a heart attack look like?

Linda Tapia certainly wasn't envisioning herself—healthy, active and in her forties — when she began experiencing chest pain two years ago.

She was at home in Longmont, emptying the dishwasher on a Sunday morning, when a sharp sting began to radiate from her chest into her jaw and down her left arm. She sat down and felt short of breath.

“When I got to the emergency room, the doctor came in and told me there was trauma to my heart,” Tapia recalls.



But the cardiology team at [Kaiser Permanente](https://specialtycarecolorado.kaiserpermanente.org/cardiology/?utm_source=5280&utm_medium=native&utm_campaign=cardiology) [https://specialtycarecolorado.kaiserpermanente.org/cardiology/?utm_source=5280&utm_medium=native&utm_campaign=cardiology] recognized that Tapia wasn't having what she believed was a heart attack. Instead, she was diagnosed with [spontaneous coronary artery dissection](https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/spontaneous-coronary-artery-dissection/symptoms-causes/syc-20353711) [https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/spontaneous-coronary-artery-dissection/symptoms-causes/syc-20353711] (also known as SCAD). “It’s a tear in the artery or arterial wall,” explains Tapia’s cardiologist DeeAnn Rivera, MD. “Blood then pools in the vessel, compressing the artery and stopping its flow to the heart.”

Many SCAD symptoms are similar to heart attack: chest pain, shortness of breath, pain in the arm or jaw. It takes a keen eye—and some high-tech analysis—to diagnose it.

It’s unclear why, but SCAD impacts women at significantly higher rates than men and usually presents between the ages of 30 and 50. Unlike a traditional heart attack, risk factors such as high cholesterol, smoking, and diabetes aren’t linked to SCAD. During and after pregnancy can be riskier periods, but it can also “happen out of the blue,” Dr. Rivera says. The diagnosis [accounts for around one-third of suspected heart attacks in women younger than 50](https://www.pennmedicine.org/news/news-) [https://www.pennmedicine.org/news/news-]

[blog/2019/february/scad-whats-overlooked-can-fatal](#)] . “SCAD is not common, but it’s also not super rare,” she adds.

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Heart disease remains the [leading cause of death in the United States](https://www.cdc.gov/heartdisease/facts.htm) [https://www.cdc.gov/heartdisease/facts.htm] for both women and men, and most racial and ethnic identities, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Tapia was lucky: She recovered quickly and didn’t require additional tests. But Dr. Rivera says Kaiser Permanente’s integrated care model means if there had been complications, Tapia would have been in good hands. “I could order those tests in the same office building and have the results come back to me the same day,” Dr. Rivera says. “With one click of a button, I have access to anybody else I need...I have an interventionalist, someone who is even more of an expert in the coronary arteries, to take a look if I have concerns. Everyone comes together as a team. All of that is available without having to have a referral outside the system.”



SCAD has a high survival rate. It typically resolves itself with time, Dr. Rivera says, as was the case with Tapia, who was prescribed blood thinners and aspirin and was able to return home after just a couple of days.

Today, Tapia is back to enjoying the Colorado activities she's always loved, like hiking and skiing. Dr. Rivera credits Tapia's smart decision-making—going to the ER and seeing a doctor right away—for her positive outcome. "Sometimes, if a cardiac patient waits too long, the damage is done," she says. "If you have something that is not feeling correct, that is not feeling right, get it checked out."

Staying Heart Healthy

Unlike cardiovascular disease, which is **largely preventable** [<https://www.heart.org/en/get-involved/advocate/federal-priorities/cdc-prevention-programs>], SCAD isn't linked to lifestyle choices. That doesn't mean you shouldn't work to maintain a healthy heart. Dr. Rivera prescribes a general regimen of a healthy diet and an active lifestyle. The CDC also recommends quitting smoking, limiting alcohol intake, and generally keeping your stress levels under control (easier said than done, we know) to help reduce your chances of developing heart disease.
