

**Daily Camera Article – February 2017**  
**A broken heart is a real medical diagnosis**  
**By Lauren Bennett – Grillo Health Information Center**

**Q.** Since the death of Debbie Reynolds soon after losing her daughter, Carrie Fisher, I've been hearing about "Broken Heart Syndrome." Is this a real medical condition?

**A.** Broken heart syndrome (BHS) is an accepted medical diagnosis also known as Takotsubo cardiomyopathy or stress cardiomyopathy. It was first described in Japan in 1990 but has only recently been widely recognized. While its cause isn't fully understood, the condition is characterized by rapid onset of severe heart muscle weakness following an intense emotional stressor, such as extreme grief, fear, anger, or surprise, or an intense physical stressor, such as major surgery, a severe asthma attack or an automobile accident.

The most common symptoms are chest pain, shortness of breath, low blood pressure and shock occurring minutes to hours after the stressful event. These symptoms mimic those of a heart attack and initial treatments, aimed at supporting heart function, are similar.

For reasons yet unknown, BHS is primarily seen in postmenopausal women (90 percent of cases are in women ages 58-75) with no history of heart disease.

**Can BHS cause cardiovascular damage like a heart attack?**

BHS can be life-threatening, but it is usually a temporary condition with no lasting impairment. Heart attacks are caused by blockages in the coronary arteries that can cause heart cells to die, resulting in permanent damage. No such blockage is found in BHS cases. One theory of BHS is that heart cells are overwhelmed by a surge of adrenaline, the "fight-or-flight" hormone released in times of stress. This surge temporarily weakens the heart muscle, preventing it from pumping enough blood to the rest of the body.

BHS lasts only days to weeks, and usually resolves without damage to the heart. However, up to 20 percent of cases may result in some continuing heart weakness. Infrequent complications include heartbeat irregularities, heart valve problems and fluid accumulation in the lungs. In rare cases, BHS is fatal.

**How can I prevent BHS?**

While BHS cannot be directly prevented, making conscious lifestyle choices can influence how one's body will respond to inevitable stressors. The NIH National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute emphasizes the importance of healthy stress management habits as well as a balanced diet and regular exercise.

While a broken heart may have played a part in the death of Reynolds, the official cause was intracerebral hemorrhage (stroke) rather than BHS.

*Lauren Bennett volunteers at the **Grillo Center**, which offers free, confidential research to assist in health understanding and decisions. **To use this service, contact us at <http://www.grillocenter.org/>, 720-854-7293 or 4715 Arapahoe Ave, Boulder.** No research or assistance should be interpreted as medical advice. We encourage informed consultation with your health care provider.*

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**Where to find it:**

National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute

(<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/health-topics/topics/broken-heart-syndrome>)

Google: "NHLBI broken heart"

Mayo Clinic

(<http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/broken-heart-syndrome/home/ovc-20264165>)

Google: "Mayo Clinic BHS"

Johns Hopkins Medicine

(<http://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/asc/faqs.html>)

Google: "Johns Hopkins broken heart FAQ"

Harvard Women's Health Watch

(<http://www.health.harvard.edu/heart-health/takotsubo-cardiomyopathy-broken-heart-syndrome>)

Google: "Harvard Health broken heart"