

# **Dr. Michael Rocha, Cardiologist: Actress Carrie Fisher, Star Wars' Princess Leia gone too soon from a heart attack at age 60**

It wasn't supposed to end this way. For the last several days, the country has been holding it's breath expecting someone to tell us that actress Carrie Fisher was safe and out of danger. News of Fisher's in flight cardiac arrest and heart attack didn't seem real last Friday and still doesn't today. The script was supposed to play out that the doctors and nurses on the plane kept her alive with CPR in time for the best of modern medicine to save her life. Our ability to treat life threatening cardiac events has been revolutionized over the last 20 years with stents and bypass surgery becoming part of our common vocabulary. However, we sadly learned this Tuesday of this shocking tragedy, one that has awakened us to the fragility of life.

As a cardiologist, this is a real life scenario that is our worst nightmare with a devastating impact upon families and communities. One minute someone is alive and well and the next minute they are gone. A tragedy like this gives us all a pause to discuss and learn how to better protect ourselves and our loved ones from heart disease. It also teaches us to live each moment with purpose, meaning, and gratitude.

Many things factor into heart disease which is by far the #1 killer of men and women in the US accounting for 1 in 4 deaths with heart attacks accounting for 370,000 deaths a year. Risk factors for heart attacks include smoking, a family history of a close relative with a heart attack at an early age, high

blood pressure, high cholesterol, obesity, age, lack of exercise, and diabetes. Also, cocaine use can result in a heart attack in some instances. Many of these risk are in our control or can be effectively treated if we are aware of them.

Some studies have estimated that up to 80% of heart attack in men and women could be prevented through a healthy diet, normal waistline, exercise and not smoking. We recently learned in 2016 that even those with a strong genetic predisposition can cut their heart attack risk in half with a healthy lifestyle. Also, our mental wellbeing may play a role with heart disease as acute stress, chronic stress, and anger have been associated with a higher rate of heart attacks in some studies.

There has been confusing terminology used in the news over the last few days which originally referred to this tragedy as a cardiac episode. A cardiac arrest is when the heart does not adequately pump to provide blood to the rest of the body to maintain a blood pressure that keeps vital organs with oxygen. The person is unresponsive in this instance. This can be from many reasons including a heart attack or a sudden abnormality in the heart rhythm. Up to almost 50% of patients in cardiac arrest don't even make it to the hospital. In the event of a cardiac arrest, CPR can help keep some level of blood flow and oxygen to the body until the heart's pumping function can be restored, sometimes with a defibrillator shock to the heart or with special intravenous medicines.

To simplify, a classic heart attack is when the blood flow to one of the major arteries supplying blood to the the heart is either critically narrowed or completely blocked producing varying degrees of damage to the heart muscle. Patients are usually awake and have a blood pressure while having a heart attack, but a massive heart attack can lead to a cardiac arrest. Often, treatment of a major heart attack is done by opening the artery with a balloon and keeping it open with a stent, which is a mesh-like metal sleeve placed into the

blocked artery.

The signs and symptoms of a heart attack can vary with the classic sign being a pain or discomfort that is often described as a pressure, heaviness, tightness, squeezing or burning in the chest, usually in the middle or left side of the chest. Sometimes, this discomfort goes up to the neck and jaw and down the left arm. Patients may have sweats, nausea and/or vomiting. Some patients may have other symptoms like an upper stomach indigestive type pain, shoulder pain, back pain, shortness of breath, unusual fatigue, or dizziness. Women less often than men have the typical chest discomfort symptoms but women still most often have chest discomfort as the primary symptom.

Heart attacks can strike at anytime and although our ability to treat them are dramatically improved, they are still life threatening. Please get checked if you are concerned with your symptoms and especially don't wait to call 911 if symptoms are going on longer than 15 minutes. KNOW YOUR NUMBERS – cholesterol, blood pressure and blood sugar. Remember that up to 80% of heart attacks are preventable through eating healthy, exercising, and not smoking. Therefore, you can do a lot to cut your risk each day. Also, LEARN CPR it can save a life and if in doubt, call 911.

Let's start a heart healthy revolution in our community. I prefer to see you out for a walk, not in the emergency room. Don't underestimate the value of a healthy lifestyle and treating your risk factors when it comes to heart disease.

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**To learn more from the American Heart Association:**  
[heart.org/HEARTORG/Conditions/911-Warnings-Signs-of-a-Heart-Attack\\_UCM\\_305346\\_SubHomePage.jsp](http://heart.org/HEARTORG/Conditions/911-Warnings-Signs-of-a-Heart-Attack_UCM_305346_SubHomePage.jsp)

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