

Stephanie's Story



Stephanie's heart was on her mind a lot three years ago. Just walking across the parking lot to her car left her out of breath. "I had trouble keeping up with the normal things I wanted to do. When you sit or walk, you're not supposed to feel how hard your body works to get you around," said Stephanie, 27. "But I could feel my heart working really hard."

At 16, Stephanie, who was overweight, had been diagnosed with diabetes, high cholesterol and high blood pressure. Stephanie said these things were mentioned casually by her physician. In short, she didn't know they were a big deal. "Because I wasn't well educated about those conditions, they went unmanaged for a long time."

As a college undergraduate, Stephanie said she ate a typical fast-food diet. "I rarely cooked my own food and often ate out."

The only reason she started managing her conditions was a minor car accident when she was 23. She visited a health center where she was told her blood pressure it was 236 over 160. They said 'we can't let you walk anywhere.'

Stephanie went to the hospital, then spent the next year trying to manage her conditions with medication. "But we couldn't get my blood pressure down. We couldn't get my blood sugars under control. I was tired all the time and then I started having chest pain."

Stephanie was diagnosed with coronary artery disease at 24, when she learned that two of her arteries were 90 percent blocked. She had surgery to insert three stents. The next week she felt miserable as she recovered. But the week after, she felt great. Healthy.

"When I got out of the hospital, I felt like I could do anything I wanted," she said. "I immediately became 10 times more active. I started playing a lot of tennis. I started running."

Today Stephanie, a graduate student in New York, has lost 70 pounds and significantly reduced her blood pressure and cholesterol. She works out five to six times a week and is training for a marathon. She said her experience has pushed her to eat healthy. Now a "picky vegetarian," Stephanie's diet is heavy on protein, fiber and produce. "I'm a big label reader."

When she feels her heart beating, it's because she's been pushing herself physically – for example, inline skating from one place to another. "After stents, I was amazed at how much I could do. Just being able to park the car and walk across the parking lot without pain has been a big change."

Learning to trust her body has been another. "The best advice I can give is to get regular check-ups from your primary care doctor. And if you feel something unusual that you don't understand, trust your body and go to the doctor immediately."

Stephanie said she was shocked to learn that heart disease is the No. 1 killer of women. "When you think about people having heart attacks and strokes and angioplasties, you don't automatically think about people who are in their 20s or 30s."

"I'm young. I was a regular college student and I developed heart disease. The American Heart Association's Go Red For Women movement shows women that everyone can find someone they can relate to and that they're not alone in their struggle."



Stephanie - Brooklyn, NY
Age: 27
Age at time of event: 24