

Theresa's Story



Theresa has a message for every woman who puts off seeing her doctor: Don't do it.

"As women we say, 'Oh, I have to make a doctor's appointment, but this week I have soccer games to attend, so I'll do it next week.'" But Theresa knew she should see her doctor when she felt tired, short of breath and had back and chest pains last year. She didn't put it off.

The fatigue was really getting to her. "I wouldn't carry the laundry up and down the steps, because I knew that it would wear me out." She pledged to rest more. "I would get tired washing my hair. I thought, 'Well, I'm really out of shape – I can't even wash my hair anymore.' I'd put the girls to bed around eight o'clock, and I'd sit down to watch TV, and by nine o'clock I was asleep."

Theresa had a stress test. "I had a feeling that it was my heart, but all the tests were saying it wasn't. A lot of people told me that if I had been a man who had gone to the doctor with the same symptoms, I would've been sent straight to the Emergency Room."

Two months later, Theresa had a massive heart attack at a family birthday party. She was 38. "I was throwing my plate away when a funny sensation came over me, like the blood was drained from me," she said. "Both my arms felt heavy and numb, and I had an odd sensation of pressure in my jaws." The pain got worse. "I felt like an elephant was standing on my chest. It was difficult for me to talk," she said. "If I could have crawled out of my body, I would have." At that point, Theresa didn't doubt that it was her heart – but the paramedics did. They thought she could walk to the ambulance.

When the EKG at the hospital showed she was having a massive heart attack, Theresa was airlifted to another hospital near Baltimore – and the doctor told John that he should bring their daughters to say goodbye. Theresa had four stents to open blockages in blood vessels that provide nutrition and oxygen to her heart, allowing blood to flow smoothly to her heart again, and spent five days at the hospital recovering.

"When I was lying in the hospital bed, I thought, 'Why did this happen to me?'" Theresa said. "I'm 38 years old." She found out that her family history was partly to blame. Theresa's brother had a heart attack at 47; her father died of one, and all of his siblings died of heart disease before age 60. "But I was a child when they died. And so many years had passed that I didn't realize that I had a risk factor."

In addition, "the only exercise I got was running after my kids, and I ate whatever I wanted." At home, she had three great reasons to get in shape: a supportive husband and their daughters, Elizabeth and Grace. She called the girls into her bedroom and drew a picture of her heart to help explain what happened. She didn't want them to be afraid. But she wanted them to understand. "They knew I had a heart attack. Their pediatrician said to tell them that the blockage in blood vessels nurturing her heart was fixed and reassure them that I would be OK."

Her daughters also learned that their mom needs to exercise to stay healthy. Theresa and John both follow a heart-healthy diet now. "I eat completely differently than I used to. I look at each day as a gift."

The community of Go Red For Women has also played a role in Theresa's recovery. "It's great because when you're 38 years old and you have a heart attack, a lot of people don't know what you're going through – the emotions, the fear. It's so nice to meet other women and know, 'OK, I've survived a year, but these women have survived eight years, 10 years. They're still alive and here to tell their story. So I feel really lucky to meet them."

"I want women to know that their family history is important, that they should know their blood pressure and cholesterol numbers. Even though I have a family history of heart disease, I still didn't think, as a woman, that it could happen to me. If I had realized that I was at risk, I would hope that I would have lived differently."



Theresa - Lutherville, MD
Age: 39
Age at time of event: 38