

“I Had a Heart Attack...at 37”

YES, EVEN YOUNGER LATINAS ARE AT RISK FOR HEART DISEASE—THE NUMBER-ONE KILLER OF WOMEN IN THE U.S.

But here’s the good news: Research shows that heart disease is largely preventable (80% of cardiac events are linked to unhealthy choices). That means you have the power to change your heart-health destiny by making small tweaks to your daily habits. Use this guide to be inspired by one survivor’s story, find out if you’re at risk and learn simple steps you can take to boost your heart health.

Erika’s life-changing night

“When I put my 10-day-old son, Joshua, to bed on February 2, 2011, I felt dizzy and exhausted, but I figured it was just the stress of caring for a newborn. Later, as I was trying to fall asleep, I felt a tightness in the left side of my chest. I told my husband, Ernesto, ‘I must have gas from eating beans.’ He made me chamomile tea, because it’s relaxing. But the pain grew worse—it felt like something was stuck inside my chest. Ernesto said, ‘I’m calling 911.’ I fought back: ‘No. It’s 10:30 at night. I don’t want an ambulance to wake the neighbors. If it’s only

gas, I’ll be embarrassed.’ Thank God he called anyway.

When EMS workers arrived, my blood pressure was high, but my EKG was normal. They encouraged me to go to the hospital just to be safe, but I didn’t want to. A few minutes after they left, I regretted my decision. The pain spread to my back, left arm and fingers. My daughter, Natalie, woke up and we asked her to watch the baby. My husband drove me straight to the emergency room.

Facing fears

At the hospital, my blood pressure was still high—but this time, my EKG was abnormal. I wasn’t sure what that meant, but my doctor said, ‘You’re having a massive heart attack.’ Suddenly there was an IV in me. My world started to spin. I was only 37 years old! I was so scared. I thought: *My grandpa and aunt died of a heart attack, so now I will too.*



I kept praying to God to give me a second chance. After two hours, a doctor said, ‘You made it.’ I cried and laughed because I was so relieved.”

TOP: MATT MEADOWS/GETTY; FAR LEFT AND FAR RIGHT: GETTY.

KNOW YOUR RISKS!

Check out these risk factors, and if one or more apply to you, talk to your doctor about steps you can take to prevent heart disease and lower your chances of a heart attack (don’t let it catch you off guard!).

- ♥ Family history (especially if a parent or sibling has it)
- ♥ Pre-hypertension (blood pressure over 120/80 mm Hg)
- ♥ Smoking
- ♥ Borderline high LDL (“bad”) cholesterol (over 130 mg/DL)
- ♥ Low HDL (“good”) cholesterol (below 50 mg/DL)
- ♥ Diabetes
- ♥ Smoking
- ♥ Being post-menopausal
- ♥ Obesity (a BMI of 30 or higher)

SOURCE: American Heart Association

The tough truth

Doctors discovered that I had 100% blockage in one artery, plus a tear. They inserted a stent to keep my blood flowing. I was awake and felt some pain during the procedure (they couldn’t put me to sleep because my heart might have stopped), but I was so afraid of dying that I didn’t care. During the operation, I couldn’t stop crying. I kept praying to God to give me a second chance.

After two hours, a doctor said, ‘You made it.’ I cried and laughed because I was so relieved. I stayed in the hospital for four days and then went to outpatient cardiac rehab for a month. I was given medicine to treat high cholesterol and high blood pressure and a booklet about how to eat better and exercise more. My doctor said, ‘Your lifestyle has to change. You need to take care of your heart.’

Finding support

Afterward, I felt anxious because I was terrified that I would have another heart attack. I started looking for resources online and found *GoRedForWomen.org*. I read stories from women like me who had had heart attacks. They were doing well, and I thought, *Maybe I’ll be OK too.*

Now, I spread the heart-healthy message as a national spokesperson for Go Red. Don’t brush off telling symptoms—and change your habits now, so you don’t have to go through what I did.” *As told to Jane Bianchi*

RECOGNIZE A HEART ATTACK

Men’s and women’s symptoms differ, so learn these key signs—and if you experience one or more, call 911 immediately.



- ➕ Chest pain or pressure (feeling like there’s a weight on you)
- ➕ Pain in arms, back, shoulder, neck, jaw and/or abdomen (especially if it’s with emotional stress or physical activity)
- ➕ Breaking out in a cold sweat
- ➕ Sudden dizziness
- ➕ Nausea or discomfort in pit of stomach
- ➕ Fatigue that comes on suddenly
- ➕ Shortness of breath

SOURCE: Amparo Villablanca, MD, director, University of California Davis Women’s Cardiovascular Medicine Program, member of the WomenHeart Scientific Advisory Council and *Woman’s Day* Heart Health Advisory Board.

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WAYS TO BOOST YOUR HEART HEALTH

THESE EASY STEPS WILL HELP YOU PROTECT YOUR TICKER FOR LIFE.

by Alyssa Shaffer



1. Shift your diet

New research shows that about 30% of heart attacks, strokes and deaths from heart disease could be prevented among people at high risk if they followed a Mediterranean approach to eating, with meals rich in olive oil, nuts, beans, fish, fruits and vegetables. Aim to eat more whole grains (try brown rice instead of white at least once a week), fruits and vegetables, and at least two servings of fatty fish a week.

2. Be a smart mama

If you've had a pregnancy-related complication, such as gestational diabetes or preeclampsia, it's important to stay on top of your heart health. Recent evidence shows that women who have had these issues are at a much higher risk for developing cardiovascular disease within 10 years of giving birth. Talk to your primary doctor—or your ob/gyn—about getting regular screenings (like monitoring your blood glucose levels).

3. Get more sleep

Research has shown that women who sleep less than 6 or so hours a night have a higher risk of coronary artery calcification (a prediction of future heart disease)—but sleeping just one hour longer a night can curb this risk by 33%. Make sleep a priority.

4. Take a deep breath

Whether it's due to family drama or a traffic jam, everyone encounters stress. The key is how you respond to it. A few minutes of deep breathing each day can lower your stress response. That's important because the less stress you feel, the less inflammation your body will produce. Find time to relax each day; try listening to music or meditating.

5. Move a little daily

Just 30 minutes a day of activities like biking, walking, swimming or even salsa dancing—anything that raises your heart rate consistently for at least 10 minutes at a time—can have an impact on your heart health. Research is also starting to show that sitting for long periods of time can increase your risk of heart disease. So get up and walk around every hour, no matter what.

SOURCE: Jennifer Mieres, MD, cardiologist, North Shore-LIJ Health System and member of the *Woman's Day* Heart Health Advisory Board

FREE RESOURCES AND TIPS

For expert advice, recipes and online communities, check out these sites:

GO RED CORAZON
goredcorazon.org

WOMENHEART EN ESPAÑOL
womenheart.org/espanol

THE HEART TRUTH FOR LATINAS
nhlbi.nih.gov/educational/hearttruth

