



Smokers are a Heart Attack Waiting to Happen

Inhale. Pause. Exhale. Slowly and deliberately a cigarette gives smokers immediate satisfaction.

Now picture that swirl of smoke upon exhale creeping around your body and taking hold, like a tight hug. It grips your heart and won't let go – literally squeezing the life out of you.

Unfortunately Cathy Porter, age 61, can relate all too well. She smoked at least a pack a day for 20 years. It caught up with her the day before she turned 45. She was in Manhattan, Kan., watching her 12 year-old son, Denver, participate in Odyssey of the Mind (an academic problem-solving competition). During a lunch break at a local diner, she thought she had severe heart burn and turned lightheaded.

"I instantly thought to myself, 'This can't be a heart attack. I'm too young. I don't have pain in my arm. Plus, I'm a woman,'" Cathy says. "I had no idea that heart disease is the leading killer of women, and I was almost one of them because I smoked. Nicotine has power over those who use it. Everyone knows there are serious consequences to smoking but thinks, 'It won't happen to me.' Guess what? It does."

Cathy's heart attack was caused by a "crack in the plaque." Hard and soft plaque attaches to the lining of arteries. Sometimes smokers' soft plaque can pull away from the lining, causing a tear that bleeds. In Cathy's case, the blood backed up into her heart resulting in her heart attack.

"It's an absolutely terrifying experience," Cathy says. "In the hospital I didn't want to go to sleep because I wasn't sure if I would wake up. All I could think of were my two kids. I could not leave them. I quit smoking right then and there because I was too scared of dying."

Two Steps Forward, One Step Back

The damage to Cathy's heart was done. Five years after her heart attack doctors found scar tissue was causing blood to clot and her heart to swell, ballooning from a football to basketball shape. Instead of a transplant down the road, she decided to have open-heart surgery to remove the aneurysm and scar tissue.

"Facing open-heart surgery was nerve-racking for my entire family," Cathy says. "I was always in control. I had to surrender and realize everything was actually out of my control."

The surgery was successful and eventually she recovered. Routine doctor visits, daily medication and echocardiograms are engrained in her life. It hasn't been easy. Cathy is often short of breath and lacks stamina. She has been through two more surgeries – both to implant cardioverter defibrillators, which regulate her heart's rate and rhythm. Also, she suffered another heart attack in 2012.

"I had dozed off while watching a basketball game with my husband. When I woke up, it was like a slap in the face," she recalls. "I looked at my husband and he immediately said, 'We're going to the ER.' I didn't have any traditional symptoms, but we knew. Thankfully we arrived at the hospital in minutes. Doctors could see the heart attack happening and treat it accordingly, so I didn't have any complications or long-term side effects."

Paying It Forward

Cathy has become a champion for women with heart disease. Her cardiologist asked her to become part of WomenHeart. Through the national coalition, she received extensive training and was tasked with giving 24 hours back to educating her community on heart disease. She did exactly that ... plus so much more. Three major initiatives Cathy started in Kansas City include:

- WomenHeart Support Group – Going strong since 2005, this group allows women to share heart experiences, hear speakers (e.g., cardiologists, dietitians) and receive support once a month.
- Heart Scarves – More than 7,000 women in cardiac rehab programs throughout Kansas City have received a red scarf with information about women living with heart disease. To volunteer to knit, send an email to DCL-Midwest@womenheart.org
- "A Day of Women's Heart Health" – This continuing education program at Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, Kan., occurs every other year and features presentations from leading cardiologists around the country.

Cathy's heart advocacy has shaped a community and taken her to the White House to be honored. Yet she would skip it all to have never smoked in the first place, which would have left her with a healthy heart today.