

Insight into the HEART



You Are Too Young to Have Heart Disease

My heart story is similar to a lot of women who find out they have heart issues while pregnant. Luckily for me, I found out before it was too late.

I was unaware I had **rheumatic heart disease** until I was 29 years old, pregnant and experiencing **heart failure (HF)**. The unfortunate thing is that neither I nor my APRN midwife knew I was in heart failure at the time because the warning signs of HF closely resemble pregnancy symptoms. My symptoms included shortness of breath; rapid weight gain; swollen, fluid-filled feet; higher than usual blood pressure; fatigue and trouble sleeping. All were dismissed as expected pregnancy symptoms.

Unfortunately at what was supposed to be a routine 35-week prenatal visit turned into a day filled with tests, screenings, lots of worrying, tears and unanswered questions. The **stress tests** and ultrasounds revealed that my baby had stopped growing at 30 weeks, her heart rate was very weak and that an emergency C-section was needed to save her life. Still no one knew I was in heart failure.

The C-section was successful. My daughter, who was severely underdeveloped because of intrauterine growth restriction, was born weighing 2 pounds, 12 ounces. In the NICU (neonatal intensive care unit), all the focus was on her heart and survival.



The night after my C-section I had trouble sleeping and breathing became difficult. I reported my difficulty to the hospital staff and they brought in a respiratory team to give me a nebulizer treatment. Still no one was aware I was in heart failure.

The following morning they sent me to do an **echocardiogram** and that was when it was discovered that I had fluid buildup in my lungs and scarring on my valves, which indicated rheumatic heart disease. They downplayed the seriousness of my condition and gave me some Lasix® to help relieve my fluid retention. That night I realized how serious my situation was when I went into respiratory distress, which required emergency lifesaving intervention, including a large dose of Lasix® via IV drip. I was transferred from the maternity unit to the cardiac step-down unit and officially became a cardiac patient.

I learned the true meaning of gratitude and I will live each day being thankful for life

A year later my follow-up echocardiogram revealed that the mitral valve regurgitation was severe, and there was some heart enlargement as a result. I underwent **open-heart surgery**. It was terrifying. I felt a lot of emotions because I had always seen myself as a healthy person and did not expect to undergo heart surgery at the tender age of 31.

There is nothing I could have done to prevent rheumatic heart disease, but I want to help educate others about the importance of living a healthful lifestyle. When I share my story, the standard response I get is **“you are too young to have heart disease.”** This is a common misconception about women and heart disease. I don't feel sorry for myself; instead I share my story to bring awareness to this issue.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES AND PERSPECTIVES —HEART INSIGHT

