



Our Hearts. Our Stories.

Stories of Resilience from Women Living with Heart Disease

Transcript: Donna's Story

Hi, I'm Donna Leistner. I've lived most of my life in Toronto, ON, Canada, and I love it here. This is my story.

I've always been aware of the heart disease in my family. Among the men, most have started treatment young and died in their early 70s. The women have all been fine, so I was hanging my hat on that. But I still decided to start leading a really healthy lifestyle. Since my 20s, I have watched my weight, monitored what I ate, cut down on fat even before it was popular, and exercised a lot. I hoped that by doing this, I would bypass the heart disease that affected the men in my family.

However, by my early 70s, I was beginning to have problems, but none of them were heart disease symptoms. I was getting really tired all the time, considering the great shape I was in. My muscles were always strong, but my legs just weren't functioning the way they should. I was getting lightheaded, and things just weren't great. My depression was also coming back. So, I went to the doctor and discovered—lo and behold—my blood pressure was way up, and so was my cholesterol.

I thought, how can this be? I've lived this great life, been so careful, and here I am. Various doctors ran tests and looked at everything, but they couldn't find anything really wrong. There were no symptoms except for the blood pressure and cholesterol. So, they said, "See you in a year," and gave me medications. I was in that state for a long time until I decided to go in and have my hip replaced.

Eventually, around COVID time, I also began having violent vomiting episodes. They would start totally out of the blue, usually when I was bending over or doing something vigorous like washing the floor. They would last for a couple of days, with nausea and everything. Eventually, the diagnosis was that it must be long COVID, some sort of recurring flu. I lived with that for a long time until I finally decided to go in for my hip replacement, which was just last year, in February 2024.

After one day in the hospital, I was sent home. But on the third morning, I woke up and it was so strange—it was like I wasn't in my own body. I knew where I was, but I couldn't get any movement going. I was just standing there, swaying, and I couldn't get the words out; I was gibbering. My daughter came in, called the ambulance, and I was rushed to North York General. There, the blood tests showed I was having a heart attack, and I also had blood clots in my lungs. After a lot of back and forth, they got additional feedback on my blood tests from Sunnybrook, and they said no, I wasn't currently having a heart attack—but I had had a silent one very recently, in the last day or two.

I finally got a bed and was booked in. A wonderful heart specialist started looking after me, and to my good fortune, he wasn't letting me go home until he had seen an angiogram of my heart. It took about two weeks before they could fit me in, but they kept me there and took excellent care of me. When I finally went in for the angiogram, they found that I had a 90% blockage in my central left artery. So, they put in a stent, and a couple of days later, I got to go home.

I could hardly walk. My hip had not healed, I had a heart problem, and I had around-the-clock care—but at least that part was nice.

Over the past year, I have tried to do everything I can to help myself. I did the hip rehab first, and then I got into cardiac rehab. That was a big help - it got me moving, got me out again, and started to lift my depression. Then I met a women's group, which was wonderful.

I'm doing much better - much, much better - but there are still some things I am dealing with. My hip is much better, my back is almost solved, and walking is a bit easier, but I still have some leftover issues. Doctors have discovered other arteries that have blockages, so there is still some work to do going forward. But I am prepared to do whatever it takes, keep up with my exercise, and look forward to a new life. I really am.

My final words are that I'm just grateful to be alive. I really dodged a bullet, like many of you did. I'm looking forward to a life full of hope, joy, and doing some things I have always wanted to do.

Thank you so much for listening to my story, and I want to wish you all the best in whatever your journey going forward involves.