



Our Hearts. Our Stories.

Stories of Resilience from Women Living with Heart Disease

Transcript: Leslie's Story

Hi, I'm Leslie, and my journey with microvascular angina began in 2019. Microvascular angina falls under the relatively new category of INOCA - Ischaemia with No Obstructive Coronary Artery disease.

For me, I describe it as chest pain, shortness of breath, being tired, and knowing that the blockages are in the small arteries, not the big ones. When I hear some of the horror stories that women have experienced around heart disease and diagnosis, I consider myself fortunate.

By 2019, I had been experiencing shortness of breath while exercising and doing normal household chores for several months. I finally decided it was time to act when my husband and I were cleaning the basement. I bent over to pick up a single dish to pack it away and suddenly had shortness of breath and chest pains. It took some time to recover.

I was able to see my primary healthcare provider quickly because he was aware of our family history of heart disease. He referred me for a stress test, and from there, I was ushered immediately across the hall to see a cardiologist.

Even though my stress test was negative—which I found interesting—the cardiologist still recommended that I have an angiogram due to my family history. I had the angiogram within a month, and the results were fine.

I have to admit, after receiving a good angiogram result, I was concerned. I thought, *Oh my goodness, if it's not a blocked artery like my parents and grandparents had, then it must be in my head.* It might be a good time to mention that I have had depression for over 20 years, although it has been stable. I wasn't particularly anxious—at least no more than most people going through this process.

The cardiologist diagnosed me with Cardiac Syndrome X, which I later learned is actually microvascular angina. The terminology has evolved over time. At the time, he assured me that this condition was normal for women in their 50s and that 90% of cases cleared up by the time they were 60. He admitted they didn't fully understand why, but that's just how it happened. So, I thought, *Okay.*

We tried a range of medications. Nitrates worked the best, but nothing really got me back to where I was. Sixty has come and gone, and I'm not sure if it was a wrong diagnosis, but now I am officially diagnosed with microvascular angina. The great news is that all my heart tests show my heart is working just fine. Unfortunately, the pain and unpredictability of microvascular angina are frustrating and really affect my life.

Because none of the medications—other than Nitro—seemed to help, my husband (who is incredibly supportive and excellent with doctors) and I persisted in seeking other treatment options.

The first thing my cardiologist suggested was researching CBD oil on my own. I tried it, but it wasn't very successful, and it was expensive, so we didn't pursue it further. Then, he referred me to the UHN Pain Clinic in Toronto, an excellent facility.

At the clinic, I tried a ganglion block three times - unsuccessful. I also tried spinal cord stimulation; I was the first patient they had done this procedure on for angina in Toronto, but unfortunately, it wasn't successful either. It only works about 50% of the time, so for anyone else considering it, I'd say it's worth trying. They also suggested an external TENS machine, but since they don't support it, I've opted not to pursue it further for now.

On my own, I found the *Women@Heart* peer support group in 2024. The program and the women I met through it have truly been my saving grace.

Surprisingly, it was through this group that I learned I have heart disease. Before this, I thought microvascular angina was something that would be treated, I would recover, and life would go back to normal. Looking back, it seems naïve, but no one—other than the women in this group—had ever told me this was a lifelong condition.

The peer support group helped me recognize that I can *manage* my heart disease. As part of this process, I asked my cardiologist for a referral to my local cardiac rehab program, and that has made the biggest difference in improving my daily life.

Now, I understand that life has a *new normal*—one that I am choosing to live to the fullest.