



Our Hearts. Our Stories.

Stories of Resilience from Women Living with Heart Disease

Transcript: Meghan's Story

Hi, I'm Meghan, and I live in Ottawa. My heart story starts in 2009 at the age of 36 when I began experiencing episodes of palpitations, lightheadedness, and a general feeling like my heart was going to fly out of my chest.

Due to the sporadic and random nature of the palpitations - both when they would start and how long they would last - it took a few months to get an official diagnosis of atrial fibrillation. At first, the episodes were short and usually happened when I was exercising. Then, they became more frequent and lasted longer. The most frustrating part was trying to get to the emergency room fast enough to capture an ECG reading of what was happening. My heart would return to normal rhythm before I could get a recording, making those few months before my diagnosis feel like torture. I knew something was wrong, but I just couldn't catch it.

After my diagnosis at the hospital, I was referred to a cardiologist. Back then, I wasn't really aware or concerned about the condition, even though my family had a pretty dark history with heart disease. It just didn't register with me. I was given medications and an appointment for a year later, so I went on my merry way. I think I just assumed the meds would take care of the problem, kind of like how Tylenol gets rid of a headache.

The medications were effective - until 2022. At the height of COVID's Omicron wave, I went into atrial fibrillation one night and ended up in the ER. I was monitored, cardioverted (where they use paddles to shock your heart back into a normal sinus rhythm), and then sent home.

The next night, it happened again. And then the night after that. And the night after that. For ten consecutive days, I went to the ER for cardioversions. I even spent my 49th birthday there. By the tenth night, my exhaustion had reached its limit. I was a walking zombie, and I had developed calluses on my arms from the IVs. Luckily, one of the ERs took pity on me and referred me to an electrophysiologist at the Ottawa Heart Institute. I was also put on antiarrhythmics and blood thinners, along with my usual beta blocker. At 49, that felt like a pretty heavy weight.

After talking to the electrophysiologist, I was placed on the waitlist for cardiac ablation. A year later, on June 7, 2023, I had the procedure. An ablation involves inserting a catheter into a vein in the groin, threading it into the heart, and burning the faulty electrical pathways causing the heart to go out of rhythm.

In the months following, I completed cardiac rehab at the Heart Institute and joined the Women@Heart support group to help me overcome the toll this had taken on my life. Slowly, I was able to come off all my medications and start truly living again.

Atrial fibrillation is a common arrhythmia, but that doesn't mean it should be mistaken for normal. The world can become much smaller for people with AFib. Many become afraid to leave the house for fear of an episode happening at the worst possible time - while driving, at work, or at a public event. This isolation can lead to depression. The Women@Heart program became a place where I could talk to women going through similar crises, where people truly understood me. They were my sounding board, and I felt less alone.

It's now 2025, and my heart journey is still ongoing. My atrial fibrillation has returned, and I'm on the list to receive a second ablation, which will happen in the coming weeks or months. Today, I am much more aware of my condition. I have learned a lot through facing my fears and educating myself. I know to listen to my body: no alcohol, a healthy diet, good sleep, exercise, and minimal stress. That last one—stress—is the hardest to tackle, but it's a work in progress.

I am now a Women@Heart peer support leader because I want to share the knowledge I've gained to help other women like me.