



### **Transcript: Kathleen's Story**

My name is Kathleen, and I live in Montague Township, just south of Ottawa. I'm a 66-year-old retired emergency nurse who worked in emergency rooms for over 40 years. Throughout my career, I cared for thousands of cardiac patients.

For many years, I experienced mild, intermittent chest pain. It would happen both at rest and with exercise, but I didn't have any other symptoms associated with it. I wasn't sure if it was cardiac pain, and like many women, I dismissed it. The pain didn't last, wasn't severe, and I was always really busy.

One day at work, while walking down the hall, I suddenly developed an intense central chest pressure, along with sweating and nausea. Women often have a triad of symptoms when experiencing heart problems. I rushed into the nearest bathroom, thinking I was going to throw up. I was really scared and realized that this could be cardiac pain. I didn't want to die in the bathroom, so I splashed water on my face and went back out into the hall. I propped myself up against the wall until the symptoms went away. Once I felt better, I jogged to the inter-campus bus—I had to get back to work.

It's so common for women to ignore or excuse these symptoms because they're busy or afraid of being seen as exaggerating. I finished my work, and the pain didn't return that day.

The next day, I was at home—it was my weekend. Unfortunately (or fortunately), the pain came back, along with the nausea and sweating. I told my husband, a very bright paramedic, what was happening. He stared at me and said, "What the heck is wrong with you?" and insisted I go to the hospital.

I was admitted to the emergency room, placed on a heart monitor, and underwent several ECGs, blood tests, and a cardiac MRI. It was a surreal experience being cared for by my colleagues. I much prefer being on the nurse side of the bed. I'm quite a good nurse, but I'm a terrible patient. I didn't want to complain or even tell them when I was having symptoms. Why do we women do this to ourselves?

All of the tests came back normal. I felt stupid and foolish. Why had I let myself be talked into being a patient? We women always seem to engage in negative self-talk. I had heard it so many times from my own patients. I would always reassure them that they were right to come to the ER and that further testing and referrals were appropriate. But now, I was the patient.

I was discharged and told that everything looked good—maybe my symptoms were related to my ongoing condition, systemic lupus. My husband helped me realize that I wasn't invincible. Cardiac disease runs in my family, and I decided to take it seriously. I was referred to a cardiologist, had a Holter monitor, and was scheduled for an angiogram.

During my first angiogram, they began the procedure by inserting a catheter into my right radial artery in my wrist. Unfortunately, my artery went into spasm, so they had to stop and switch to my right groin to complete the test. After the procedure, the cardiologist told me I had the heart of a 20-year-old—but he suspected I had a "spastic" vessel based on the reaction of my wrist artery. He started me on some medication, and I was sent

off to conquer the world. He followed me for a year, during which I only had very minor episodes of chest pain. Eventually, I was discharged from cardiology, and my family doctor resumed my care.

Things were good for two or three years—just the occasional mild chest pain, maybe a 2–3 out of 10. Then it happened again.

It was the summer of 2024. I was out walking the dogs when I was suddenly hit with severe chest pain and sweating. I became so short of breath that I had to sit down on the side of the road. Thank God I always carry my cell phone. I felt so sick that I readily agreed to go to the hospital.

This time, I was referred to Dr. Grube at the Women's Heart Health Centre at the Ottawa Heart Institute. Even though she knew I was a nurse, she took the time to explain everything to me in the level of detail I needed. She repeated my Holter monitor, ordered an echocardiogram and a repeat angiogram, and referred me to the cardiac rehab program at the Heart Institute.

Cardiac rehab was a great program. It helped me identify my limitations and improve my exercise tolerance safely. There were several other programs I could register for, all organized by the Women's Heart Health Centre. I chose the *Women@Heart* peer support group—and I'm so glad I did.

*Women@Heart* was a salvation. I met other women who had all been diagnosed with serious heart conditions. Our facilitators, Gale and Megan, guided us through a wide range of topics, from cardiac physiology, medications, diet, and exercise to sessions on supporting your emotional health, setting limits, and—most importantly for me—how to say no.

The best part of the group was connecting with the other women. They understood what I had gone through in a way that even my nurse friends couldn't. We did this for each other every time we met. Our group still meets once a month to check in and support each other.

A few months ago, I had my repeat angiogram. During the test, one of my major cardiac arteries went into a severe spasm. I was diagnosed with Prinzmetal angina, or cardiac arterial spasm. These spasms can happen randomly, but they can also be triggered by stress.

I'm now on new medications, I've limited the number of projects I take on, and I'm doing yoga and meditating. Thanks to the Women's Heart Health Centre and the Ottawa Heart Institute, I've had a difficult-to-diagnose condition identified and treated. And I've found a wonderful group of supportive women who've helped me along the way.