



Our Hearts. Our Stories.

Stories of Resilience from Women Living with Heart Disease

Transcript: Helen's Story

Hi everyone,

My story began in May of 2015. I was an active 49-year-old in very good health. I always had positive annual checkups and had never been hospitalized—except to give birth. Health was something I never really thought about. Frankly, I took it for granted.

One Friday morning, I got up, made some coffee, and sat down to tackle my emails. All of a sudden, I started feeling a little lightheaded and a bit nauseous. I called my husband, who was already at work, and let him know I was going to stay home sick that day.

While I was talking to him, I began experiencing this incredible, unbelievable chest pain. It came out of nowhere. It felt like concrete walls were crushing me from all directions. I couldn't catch my breath. It was truly awful.

My husband told me it sounded like I was having a heart attack and insisted I call 911. I thought that was ridiculous—but the pain kept getting worse. So I made the call.

The paramedics arrived quickly. They did an ECG, gave me aspirin and nitroglycerin, and rushed me to the nearest hospital. It was clearly the right call.

In the emergency room, the doctors seemed confused. They were grasping at straws, trying to find any possible reason why someone like me—young, healthy, and with perfect bloodwork—would have a heart attack. I was quickly admitted to the ICU for a few days.

Over the next four days, doctors came in and out of my room. Their brows were furrowed, and they had very few answers. One would say I had a heart attack. The next would question who told me that. Some even seemed horrified that someone had used the term "heart attack" at all. They told me it was very unlikely because I didn't fit the profile.

Meanwhile, I was thinking about all the things I needed to do. I had work to finish and a trip to New York to pack for. I didn't have time for this heart attack thing.

Eventually, one doctor came in and told me—without fully committing to the term "heart attack"—that whatever this was, it was the *real deal*. And New York was off the table. That was another blow. I had been so looking forward to that trip.

On the fifth day, I had an angiogram at the University of Ottawa Heart Institute. That's when I finally got a diagnosis: I had indeed had a heart attack caused by SCAD—Spontaneous Coronary Artery Dissection.

They told me SCAD was extremely rare, but not to worry. Once I healed, I could go home and get back to life. But that's when my *real* journey began.

I felt isolated and alone, even though I had an amazing support system of family and friends. I still felt like no one truly understood what I was going through. I was afraid to be alone at home. I was afraid to drive. I was afraid to carry a bag of milk. I was completely overwhelmed.

Being told that one of your arteries has spontaneously torn is kind of like walking around with an explosive device in your body—you just don't know what might set it off. And yet, doctors were telling me, "It's healing on its own, and you can go back to your life."

Ten years later, we now know that SCAD is *not* so rare. But it still often goes unrecognized and untreated—sometimes with terrible consequences. SCAD tends to affect younger, healthy women, which kept it under the radar in clinical settings for far too long.

Looking back, I was fortunate in so many ways. My husband recognized the signs and urged me to call 911. The chest pain prompted the paramedics and ER staff to take my heart seriously. I live in Ottawa, where I had access to the care, education, and support of the Heart Institute.

I participated in cardiac rehab, which gave me a safe space to rebuild my strength and face one of the most difficult challenges of my life. The program and staff were extremely helpful in my physical recovery. But there was no formal focus on the emotional aspect of recovery—which I deeply needed.

I found that emotional support through the *Women@Heart* peer support program at the University of Ottawa Heart Institute. I connected with other women and learned what it meant to live with heart disease.

That program helped me so much that I eventually became a peer support leader. Later, I worked with the Canadian Women's Heart Health Centre to adapt the program specifically for women with SCAD. I'm really thankful that we now have a virtual program in Canada that serves women with SCAD across the country.

Through that program, I also learned about the inequities in research and understanding of heart health between men and women. I became frustrated by these inequities—and I've since become an advocate for women's heart health.

Looking back, I'm grateful to my SCAD family: a strong, diverse, and inspirational group of women living with various heart diagnoses. We are working hard together to help others and create broader change.

When I reflect on my life since my SCAD event, I see how precious life truly is. I'm thankful I was here to see my daughter get married and my grandson born. My husband and I took my mother and mother-in-law on some wonderful trips and made lasting memories.

I still love to travel—and I'm learning to stop putting things off for "someday."

My message to other women is this:

You could be me.

You can have a heart attack, even if you're young and healthy.

You need to advocate for yourself when you know something is wrong.

And finally, there are some things that, just by knowing them, can save your life.

Thank you.