

Heart TKO

A Young Survivor's Story

Most people like a story with a happy ending. In movies and books, we cheer when the hero defeats the villain, solves a problem and restores life back to normal. The same goes for real-life stories – ones where people like Greg B* survive what should have been an unsurvivable “one-two” punch from a big, real-life villain – **heart attack**.

The Friday before Memorial Day weekend 2005 had been a particularly stressful workday, and Greg was glad to be on his way home at five o'clock. Before going home, Greg, a 37-year-old, healthcare executive in Richmond, Virginia, stopped at the grocery store to get all the usual fare for his family's annual backyard barbeque: a few packages of hot dogs, some burgers, buns, ketchup and sodas.

Then, without warning, things went bad. Really bad. There in aisle 7, the invisible villain quietly snuck up on Greg and delivered a blow to his chest. Greg was struggling to breathe.

Abandoning his shopping cart, Greg walked outside to get some fresh air and sit for a minute. He was trying not to panic. His first thought was that he might be having an anxiety attack due to the stressful day he'd had. Despite the short rest and fresh air, his chest was tightening and he still couldn't seem to catch his breath. It became very clear to Greg that he was having a heart attack.

Here, Greg relives that afternoon and the important things he learned from surviving a heart attack at a young age.

Q: What did you do the moment you knew you were having a heart attack?

Greg: Against my better judgment, I got in my car and drove myself to the hospital, which was a few miles up the road from the grocery store. Amazingly, I didn't hit any traffic lights or backups. I went straight into the emergency room and told them I was having a heart attack. They took me in right away.

Q: What symptoms were you experiencing?

Greg: I couldn't get my breath and I had extreme chest pain. I remember laying there on the ER bed in severe pain.

Q: What happened to you next?

Greg: Everything was moving very fast. The doctor told me I was having a heart attack and asked me a couple of questions: 1) *“Who do you want us to call for you?”* and 2) *“What, if any, drugs have you taken?”* I told him to call my wife and that I hadn't taken any drugs. The last thing I remember is hearing the doctor shout, ***“Somebody get me the paddles!”***

Q: Then what happened?

Greg: I don't remember anything after that. I was told that I went into V-fib. V-fib is short for "ventricular fibrillation", and it means that my heart ventricles went spastic and weren't pumping blood like they should. V-fib is definitely an emergency that must be treated with CPR and defibrillation right away.

The doctor restarted my heart and that lasted about 8 minutes. Then I V-fibbed again. I started having seizures this time. They had warned my wife that I probably wouldn't live through this. I later learned that only about 30% of heart attack victims survive V-fib. The doctor got my heart started again. I was taken to the cath lab and had an angioplasty and two stints put in.

When I woke up almost two days later, I had paddle burns on my chest and was hooked up to a bunch of tubes. I wasn't able to breathe on my own, so I was also hooked up to a ventilator. I was on blood thinners and anti-seizure medications. The whites of my eyes were completely bloodshot too. I looked really beat up.

Q: Most of us think that heart problems and cardiac emergencies happen only to much older people. Yours happened at age 37. Do you have a family history of heart disease?

Greg: Yes. My grandfather had his first heart attack at age 39. He had six more after that. He died at age 78. My father had a stint put in at age 59 after a stress test revealed some blockage.

Q: How has your lifestyle changed since having a heart attack?

Greg: About five or six weeks after leaving the hospital, I started cardiac rehab. I was hooked up to monitors and given an exercise plan. I've definitely quit smoking. My diet has drastically changed too. Now, I exercise at least three times per week and I eat more heart-healthy foods. I eat a lot more fruits and vegetables, whole grains like oatmeal and wheat toast, and low-fat meats like turkey and chicken. I also watch fats. I usually eat mustard on sandwiches instead of mayo.

Q: How are you now, and what is your future health outlook?

Greg: I'm very fortunate. I've made a full recovery and have no limitations. Amazingly, my heart tests show no damage. The doctor measured my ejection fraction, which tests how well my heart is pumping blood. Normal is usually 50-70%. I got a score of 63%. As a comparison, I was told that Lance Armstrong's ejection fraction measures 75%. So I'm doing pretty well.

Q: What advice can you give to others about heart health?

Greg: Know your cholesterol numbers. Most young heart attacks are due to low "good" cholesterol (HDL) as well as other factors like smoking and family history. When you get your cholesterol checked, be proactive and ask your doctor to help you understand your HDL and LDL measures. Years ago, my total cholesterol was 280. Just before my heart attack, it was down to 185. That would seem like a good thing, huh? But my HDL (good) cholesterol was below 40.

Q: What are you most thankful for now?

Greg: A second chance. Statistically, I was less likely to be alive today. I am also thankful that I had no trouble getting to the hospital that day. I found out later that the ER doctor on duty who helped me that weekend just happened to be a cardiologist.

While Greg's story ended happily, many other peoples' do not. Talk to your doctor about your risks for heart disease, including your family history, and what you can do keep a heart attack from happening to you. Get more information on heart health at MyHealth@Anthem powered by WebMD at www.anthem.com.

Additional Resources:

American Heart Association – www.americanheart.org

U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health, and National Cancer Institute - www.5aday.gov

American Lung Association – www.lungusa.org

National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute – www.nhlbi.nih.gov

*Name changed to protect privacy.