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Active woman receives surprise diagnosis

She attributed tiredness to boredom with fitness routine

As Norma Burt sat in her doctor's office one day last fall, she casually mentioned that her sister had just undergone bypass surgery. That simple statement touched off a series of events that left her reeling and still has her somewhat astounded today. "He recommended I have a second opinion on a stress test I'd had a couple of years ago," Burt says. Sitting on the sofa in her well-furnished Loudon home, Burt doesn't exactly look like someone you might suspect would need heart surgery.

Because Burt has a family history of heart disease, she's been careful to take good care of herself, keep her weight down, exercise and eat right. It was only when she started experiencing some discomfort in her chest during exercise a few years ago that her doctor sent her for that stress test. A visit to a cardiologist followed, and it was determined that her situation wasn't dire enough to warrant further testing at the time.

But that second opinion last year made all the difference. Parkwest Medical Center cardiologist Mitchell Weiss, MD, looked at the results of the test and felt Burt needed another one. On Dec. 18, Burt met with Dr. Weiss to hear the results.

"He told me the test showed blockage and recommended I have a cardio cath," Burt says. A cardiac catheterization can check blood flow in the coronary arteries, blood flow and blood pressure in the chambers of the heart, find out how well the heart valves work, and check for defects in the way the wall of the heart moves.

"During the cath he told me I had widespread blockage and that I would need bypass surgery."



Norma Burt enjoys playing the piano again, after life-saving heart surgery at Parkwest Medical Center.

"Many patients are surprised to find out that they have heart disease serious enough to warrant bypass surgery," says Dr. Weiss. "Ms. Burt had developed severe coronary artery disease, with blockages in all three of the main arteries and a few of the principle branches thereof."

Weiss says the blockages ranged in severity from 70 percent to 100 percent, but she had not yet developed damage to her heart's muscle.

Burt's friends were surprised, and so was she. After all, if ever there was a person who was a living and breathing example of healthy living, it was her. But there she was a few days later, meeting with surgeon Mike Maggart, M.D., on a Friday and then surgery was planned for just a few days before Christmas.

"It's almost like it didn't re-



Mitchell Weiss, M.D.

ally sink in," Burt says of the surprising news. "It still hasn't sunk in. I wasn't really having symptoms."

The only other sign of trouble had been a little lethargy, but she didn't recognize that as being a symptom of heart disease. When she didn't feel like exercising, Burt assumed she was just getting tired of her fitness routine and chalked it up to laziness.

"He told me to come to the emergency room if I experienced any problems over the weekend," Burt says. "I wasn't feeling well

Sunday evening. I had chest pains, tightness in the chest and some dizziness, so I went to the ER."

Burt was admitted to Parkwest Medical Center that night and underwent five-vessel bypass surgery Dec. 23. She got to go home the day after Christmas.

Weiss explains Burt underwent coronary artery surgery, in which Maggart took a vein harvested from one leg and an artery from the inner aspect of her chest wall, then "bypassed" the blockages by surgically rerouting blood into the arteries further downstream. Normal blood flow was restored to areas in need.

Weiss says Burt will likely need to stay on medication long term, but the surgical outcome was excellent.

Having had some time now to think about heart disease, how it has affected her family and where she needs to go from here, Burt has some advice she'd like to share with other women.

"I feel certain that I would not have survived before, or recovered as well after the surgery, had I not been in excellent physical health," Burt says. "I work out several times a week with both cardio and strength training. I also walk and carry my golf bag for 18 holes of golf three to four times a week." Burt recommends that women, if they aren't already on an exercise program, start one and stick with it.

She also feels strongly that it's important for a woman to get and keep her weight under control. Research from the Ameri-

can Heart Association backs her up. The AHA consistently reports that being overweight or obese raises blood pressure, raises blood cholesterol and triglyceride levels, lowers HDL "good" cholesterol, and can induce diabetes.

"Get a second opinion on important health tests," Burt continues. "Especially stress tests, and discuss changes in your physical condition with your doctor."

Last but not least, Burt says a woman should never assume that changes in her health like aches, pains and loss of energy are only signs of getting older, or other natural causes. After years of regular weekly exercise, Burt experienced physical changes that she shrugged off.

"I didn't feel like exercising," Burt says, "but I thought I was just getting burned out on exercise."

Dr. Weiss agrees that being proactive when it comes to your health is always the best way. "I can't stress enough the importance of seeking attention sooner rather than later," Dr. Weiss says.

"We want to intervene before significant heart damage has occurred, in hopes of preventing the development of congestive heart failure, permanent disability and even premature death."

Burt says she feels well and has started some exercise. During this time while her activity has to be limited, she's also rekindled an old love – playing her grand piano.

To learn more about the life-saving heart procedures at Parkwest Medical Center, visit treatedwell.com, or call 865-374-7275.

Debunking common heart disease myths

Think you're immune to heart disease? This might change your mind.

* Myth: It's a guy thing.

There's a common misconception that heart attacks are predominantly a threat to men. In reality, heart disease strikes more women than men. A woman dies from heart disease about every minute.

* Myth: It's for older people.

Heart disease impacts women and men of every age. In women, the use of birth control pills and smoking increases heart disease risk by 20 percent. Habits like overeating and living a sedentary lifestyle can make you more likely to suffer heart disease later in life.

* Myth: I exercise, so I don't have to worry.

Staying active definitely helps reduce your chances of developing heart disease. However, no amount of exercise can completely eliminate the risk. In addition, habits like smoking and unhealthy eating can counterbalance that exercise. You can also have high cholesterol (a key risk factor) even when you're not overweight. The American Heart

Association recommends you start getting your cholesterol checked at age 20.

* Myth: I don't have symptoms, so I'm OK.

Believe it or not, 64-percent of women who have died suddenly from coronary heart disease had no previous symptoms. It's also possible to have symptoms without realizing it. Contrary to popular belief, severe chest pain isn't the most common symptom of a heart attack for women. Women are more likely to experience shortness of breath, nausea, vomiting and pain in the back or jaw. Dizziness, lightheadedness, fainting, pain in the lower chest or upper abdomen and extreme fatigue are other signs to watch for.

* Myth: Heart disease runs in my family, so I can't fight it.

Yes, you're at a higher risk if there's a history of heart disease in your family, but there's still a lot you can do to dramatically reduce your risk. It's estimated that healthy choices and awareness of symptoms have saved more than 627,000 women from the effects of heart disease.



Did you know?

- Heart disease is the No. 1 killer of women and is more deadly than all forms of cancer combined.
- Heart disease causes 1 in 3 women's deaths each year, killing approximately one woman every minute.
- An estimated 43 million women in the U.S. are affected by heart disease.
- 90 percent of women have one or more risk factors for developing heart disease.
- The symptoms of heart disease can be different in women and men and are often misunderstood.
- While 1 in 31 American women dies from breast cancer each year, 1 in 3 dies of heart disease.
- Hispanic women are likely to develop heart disease 10 years earlier than Caucasian women.
- Cardiovascular disease is the leading cause of death for African-American women.

Source: the American Heart Association

Learn how a device this small gives hope to high-risk heart patients.

