

HEEDING heart symptoms

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
Friday, 04 March 2011 14:07 -



Second of two parts.

A kink in her left shoulder blade. An ache in her left arm. Tingling in her left hand.

Shortness of breath.

“I never really thought one had to do with another,” says Jodi Carlson of rural Gothenburg. “I put my symptoms into individual baskets.”

* * * *

Sunny San Diego, CA.

Jodi was born and lived there until her dad died suddenly of a heart attack at age 46. Her mother, Pat Thompson, later remarried and moved her son and daughter to Gothenburg.

She graduated from high school, married Keith Carlson, raised three children on a farm near Arnold and, for several years, worked at Five Star Flooring.

Last summer, the ache in her shoulder blade intensified. Especially after she exercised.

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The then 50-year-old didn't smoke, wasn't overweight or diabetic and she exercised.

Normal tasks became an effort but she still, in her mind, compartmentalized all of the symptoms.

"I thought it was part of getting older," Jodi said.

One day last fall, she learned that heart disease indicators for women can manifest in the shoulder blade and back.

"That's when I decided to listen to the small, faint voice in my gut that said to go check it out with the doctor."

After an electrocardiogram, Jodi was sent to a satellite clinic in North Platte for a nuclear stress test.

That revealed some abnormalities on the bottom of her heart but the doctors weren't alarmed.

As a precaution, they sent her to the Lincoln Heart Institute for a routine heart catheterization.

On Dec. 7, 2010, Jodi had the procedure. Afterward, she and Keith planned to go shopping.

"If anything, I thought I might need a stent but that still seemed ridiculous," she said.

The couple was unprepared for the shocking news.

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Six heart vessels showed major blockage. Jodi needed open heart surgery.

“A surgical team was waiting for me on the spot, sharpening their knives and cranking up the chain saw,” she said.

The couple needed to process what had happened so bargained with Jodi’s heart surgeon to return the next morning for surgery.

Jodi and Keith booked a hotel, went out to dinner, bought a bathrobe and slippers, talked and called their loved ones.

“I wanted to tell them I loved them just in case,” Jodi said. “Because open heart surgery is such a serious procedure.”

The next day, surgeons sawed apart Jodi’s rib cage and replaced damaged vessels with veins from her groin.

During the 4-hour operation, a heart-lung machine provided oxygen-rich blood to her brain and other vital organs.

When it was finished, she had endured a triple bypass that corrected five of the six blocks—the sixth in a smaller vein that doctors thought wouldn’t be damaged if it closed.

She woke up in the worst pain she’s ever experienced.

Flat on her back and tied down. A tube down her throat that was hooked to a respirator.

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Tubes in her chest and stomach to drain infection. IVs in each wrist and Jodi's jugular vein.

"I didn't breathe on my own for several hours," she said.

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