Tim Schmeeckle is adamant about one thing these days.

“If you feel weird, go get it checked out,” he said.

Schmeeckle, who’s recovering from triple bypass surgery, should know.

And the 50-year-old farmer shudders to think what might have happened if he hadn’t heeded several warning signs.

Schmeeckle’s story begins on  a Thursday night at his farm home north of Gothenburg, near the end of January.

After eating supper, he decided to treat himself to a frozen caramel fudge ice cream cone.

He then headed downstairs to his office.

“I was sitting and looking at the computer when all of a sudden I felt my throat swelling,” Schmeeckle said. “And both my arms, in the elbow areas, were tingly.”

Schmeeckle didn’t feel pain but was uncomfortable.

“I knew something was different,” he said. “It’s hard to explain but I had never felt that way before.”

The next morning, Schmeeckle felt fine and drove to town for breakfast at a local restaurant.

Bam.

The symptoms returned and, in addition, he felt discomfort in his chest.

After driving home, he called his wife, Teri, who suggested he see his doctor.

Schmeeckle took her advice and was checked out by physician assistant Aaron Salomon who recommended an electrocardiogram test (EKG) that checked his heart beat and other electrical activity.

Everything checked out fine.

However Salomon also recommended that Schmeeckle undergo a stress test and echocardiogram in Gothenburg Memorial Hospital’s cardiac-pulmonary rehabilitation department the following week when Nebraska Heart Institute personnel were available.

On Saturday, Schmeeckle worked in his shop but felt sluggish and was short of breath. He thought he was getting the flu.

Three days later, Schmeeckle was attached to equipment at cardiac rehab was soon walking on a treadmill that increased in speed and incline to boost his heart rate.

“I was so bad out of shape,” he said with a laugh.

The last thing Schmeeckle remembers is hearing cardiac rehab director Myra Gronewold asking that the treadmill be stopped.

He then laid on a bed next to the equipment while the staff took an echocardiogram which was an ultrasound image of his heart.

Gronewold said images of the heart in motion helps cardiac specialists assess function of heart valves, changes in the contraction of the heart wall and other things.

“I was shot after the test,” Schmeeckle said. “And I had no inclination that anything was wrong.”

Thinking he still had the flu and typical aches and pains of being half a century old, Schmeeckle, was shocked to hear that he had flunked the stress test.

“How bad?” he asked.

“Bad,” he was told.

Two days later, Schmeeckle and wife were in Lincoln. Schmeeckle was scheduled for a heart catheterization in which doctors can diagnose and and treat some heart conditions.

During the procedure, if needed, the surgeon planned to implant stents to open any blocked arteries.

“I thought he’d fix the problem and send me home,” Schmeeckle said.

But the diagnosis was much more serious than what he expected.

One artery was 100% blocked and the other 60%. A third artery was blocked 70%.

The next day, on Feb. 1, Schmeeckle’s sternum was cracked open and he underwent triple bypass surgery.

Vessels were taken from an arm to carry blood from the heart, bypassing the blocked arteries, to the rest of his body.

After five days at the Nebraska Heart Institute, Schmeeckle returned home to recuperate.

Rehabilitation in GMH’s cardiac rehabilitation department is scheduled to start Friday.

Aside from a sore arm and chest, not being able to lift anything more than five pounds or drive for a month, Schmeeckle said he felt pretty well.

“I didn’t feel bad before and now I have a few more aches because of surgery,” he said.

Schmeeckle still marvels at what could have happened if he’d not seen the doctor and taken a stress test and echocardiogram.

“I could have toughened up and kept right on going,” Schmeeckle said. “But I hate to think of the outcome—a time bomb waiting to explode.

“I think God made me go (to the doctor).”

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