

## **CINDY HANEY SURVIVES CORONARY ARTERY DISEASE: HER PERSONAL STORY**

My name is Cindy Haney. I am a 31-year-old cardiac registered nurse and I am a cardiac patient myself. I am a lifetime nonsmoker. Never in a million years would I have thought I would have heart disease at my age. In fact, no one ever dreams of having coronary artery disease (CAD) in their 20s. However, as I quickly learned, the disease is no respecter of age or gender.

In October of 2007, at 26 years of age, I began having some chest pain. The pain was off and on and primarily occurred with exertion and with stress. This pain was unlike anything I'd ever felt before. I continued having chest pain for several days. I became concerned, so I went to see my primary care physician. He promptly ordered a nuclear stress test. The stress test was interpreted as normal and I was told that it wasn't my heart causing my symptoms.

Over the next several months I continued to have chest pain. Everyone, including some of the cardiologists with whom I work, told me, "It isn't your heart. Your stress test was fine. Besides, as a female you have your hormones protecting you." However, I have a very strong family history of CAD, so it was always in the back of my mind that maybe, this was my heart.

In May of 2008 my chest pain got more severe and more often and was progressively getting worse. My blood pressure was totally out of control, sometimes shooting up to 160/100. My symptoms got so bad that simply walking from a parking place into the front door of a store caused me to have severe chest pain, shortness of breath, dizziness, and diaphoresis. I was even having some pain at rest sometimes.

I again made an appointment to see my primary care physician. At that appointment he told me, "Cindy, I don't really think this is your heart, but I am going to refer you to a cardiologist anyway. If the cardiologist determines that it isn't your heart, I will keep looking until I find out what is causing your symptoms."

I saw the cardiologist in mid June of 2008. He told me that he really didn't think that it was my heart. However, he told me since I had already had a normal stress test and I was still having symptoms he needed to investigate further. Therefore, he recommended a cardiac catheterization to completely rule out my heart as the cause of my symptoms.

My cardiac catheterization was done on July 3, 2008. It revealed that I had severe multi-vessel CAD. I had blockages ranging from 70 to 90 percent. I received three stents that day. My cardiologist came out of the cardiac cath lab saying, "Cindy, I am having to eat some crow because I really didn't think that you had any CAD." One possible complication of having stents placed is that it may cause a myocardial infarction (heart attack). In the evening of July 3 and into July 4, I had "fireworks" of my own kind. I had Non ST-Segment Elevation MI. My troponin peaked at 11.61. I continued to have chest

pain while in the hospital and was taken back to the cath lab on July 7. I received two more stents that day.

I was chest-pain free for about a month. However, in September of 2008 I began having chest pain again. When my pain wasn't relieved with three sublingual Nitroglycerin, I returned to the emergency room and was admitted to the hospital. During that hospital stay, I had yet another cardiac catheterization. It revealed that my right coronary artery had dissected. The decision was made to treat me medically by increasing the dose of my beta blocker medication and starting me on long-acting nitrates. I started a cardiac rehabilitation program, but despite maximal medical therapy I continued to have chest pain with exertion and frequently had to use my sublingual Nitroglycerin.

In February of 2009, I again had some chest discomfort that was not relieved by three sublingual Nitroglycerin and went to the hospital again. I was admitted to the CVICU. The determination was made that I needed another cardiac catheterization. The cath showed that all my stents were patent; however, since September 2008 I had developed a 50 percent left main coronary artery stenosis (blockage). A surgical consult was recommended.

On February 19, 2009, three days after my 28<sup>th</sup> birthday, I had quadruple coronary artery bypass surgery. The surgeon who did my operation told me that I was the youngest patient he had ever done the procedure on. The recovery period afterward is in no way fun or easy, but in the long run, the results have been well worth it.

I am almost three years out from my surgery now, and I am probably healthier now than I was before I ever knew I had heart problems. Before I knew I had heart disease, I ate whatever I wanted and I did not exercise regularly. I now eat a low fat, low cholesterol, vegetarian diet. I am able to exercise for one hour three to five days per week without chest pain.

I am so grateful to physicians that listened to me and did not ignore my symptoms and looked until they found the cause. I feel like that it is because of them (and God) that I am alive today.

My purpose in sharing "my story" is to make others (especially young adults, and women) aware that CAD is not a respecter of age or gender and is the #1 killer among men and women. Therefore, if you are having symptoms that you are concerned may be your heart, see a doctor. Do not settle until he/she has found out the cause of your symptoms. If he/she will not listen to you, find another physician who will.

The prevalence of CAD can be reduced by risk factor modifications such as controlling blood pressure, cholesterol, and diabetes if you have these diseases. If you smoke or do drugs – STOP, eat a healthy diet – low fat, low cholesterol, low sodium, and high in fiber; exercise regularly three to five times per week for 30-60 minutes; and learn how to deal with stress properly. In our fast-paced, fast-food society, it is important to

start risk factor modification during childhood. Encourage children to be active, provide them with a healthy diet, and stress the importance of avoiding tobacco abuse.

Young adults often don't take care of themselves and they think that they are invincible. They eat/drink whatever they want. They are often sedentary and don't exercise. Young adults need to know that they are not invincible, and the time to start taking care of themselves is NOW. Even older adults need to know that it is never too late to start taking care of themselves. It may be the difference between life and death.

With some education and lifestyle changes, together, we CAN decrease the prevalence of this disease.

*In sharing her experiences in fighting heart disease, Millbrook, Alabama, resident Cindy Haney, R.N., stated her mission is to educate others: "After all I have been through with my heart, I want to share my story to raise people's awareness that heart disease can occur in young people and it affects more women than most people think."*