



In The Know

Is heart disease in your genes?

Do you have a family history of early onset heart disease? Get yourself checked out, says Heart Foundation Ambassador Tania Curtis, who was recently diagnosed with the same heart problem that killed her father 28 years ago.

When Tania Curtis was told that she had an 80 to 90 per cent blockage in her left main artery and a blood clot lodged in her heart, she thought the angiogram operator at Sydney's Sutherland Hospital was joking.

A week earlier, the 47-year-old mother of four had been jogging with her personal trainer around an oval in Kurnell when she experienced a sharp pain in her chest – “like a bolt of lightning” - that radiated down her left arm. While the pain lasted only a few minutes during which she “turned grey”, the trainer sent Tania home and told her to get a check-up before exercising again.

As fate would have it, Tania already had a doctor's appointment booked for the next day simply for a general check-up. And while her electrocardiogram and blood tests came back normal, the doctor fast-tracked an appointment for Tania to see a cardiologist.

Tania was convinced that the episode in the park was just a bad bout of indigestion, even when the cardiologist insisted she undergo an angiogram, which was booked in for 18 March 2009 - her 20-year wedding anniversary.

But instead of spending that evening celebrating the milestones with her husband John and their children – Ryan, 19, Stephanie, 17, Linden, 13, and Kathleen, 11 Tania found herself in Prince of Wales Hospital waiting and being prepared to undergo an emergency double bypass operation the day after her angiogram.

Eight months on, Tania is back in the pink of health and pursuing the fitness program that she had started six months before her life-changing episode in the park.

“I came very close to dying and feel very lucky to be here,” says Tania. “My father Norm died from a heart attack in 1971 aged 38. When I was found out that I had to have open heart surgery, I was really concerned about how my mother, Dorella, would react.

“Being a woman, I never thought this would happen to me. Women in their early 40s tend to put on weight in the tummy region as oestrogen begins to leave their bodies. The reason I started my fitness campaign was because I wanted to lose this weight, which I thought was to blame for some breathlessness I'd begun to notice when I walked briskly.”

Tania, who has been a vegetarian since she turned 20 and doesn't drink or smoke, says that her genetic predisposition made her a prime candidate for heart attack; it was just a matter of time.

“My other arteries were perfectly healthy, so lifestyle factors weren't to blame for my condition,” says Tania, who is now an Ambassador for the Heart Foundation. “I smoked when I was young but gave up 21 years ago. Had I kept smoking, like my father, or had a bad diet then this would have happened to me a lot earlier. “The cardiologist described my blockage as the ‘widow maker’. Had I not sought medical attention when I did, he says I would almost certainly have died within a week or two.

“Everyone's signs of an impending heart attack are different. Some people experience a pain in the ear; others get breathless or have a heavy, crushing feeling in the chest.

My father had tingling pain and a heavy feeling in his chest for six months, which the doctors attributed to indigestion because he didn't fit the profile of someone at risk of heart attack

“My advice is to listen to your body and if it gives you signs, no matter how subtle, that something's not right, see your doctor. It's better to have a heap of tests that come back negative than leave your family motherless or fatherless because you were too embarrassed to see a doctor about some seemingly trivial symptoms.”

Tania says a CT scan, a less invasive procedure than an angiogram, which is often covered by private health insurance, can sometimes rule out or confirm any artery blockages. "In light of our family history, I'll make sure all of my kids get tested for heart problems when they're older," she says.

Tania, who went back to her part-time job at Kurnell Public School Before & After School Care a couple of months after the operation, says being fit not only helped her pull through the operation but also sped up her recovery.

"The ambulance officer who looked after me on the trip from Sutherland Hospital to Prince of Wales said I had the best ECG results for someone with a 90 per cent blockage that he's ever seen," says Tania. "I didn't really have time to get too upset between when I was told about my heart condition and the operation because everything happened so fast.

"What was really scary was waking up at 2am the morning after the surgery in a great deal of pain and not being able to talk or move my head because I had an incubation tube down my throat. All I could do was whistle.

"Apparently, this had been left in because I was experiencing problems breathing and waking up after the anesthetic."

The day after surgery, Tania was walking in her hospital room; within a week, she was convalescing at home.

Tania said that while her husband had to go back to work straight away after her operation, she had a lot of help from her family – her two brothers, mum and sister-in-law – while she underwent eight weeks of cardiac rehabilitation as a day patient at Sutherland Hospital. The program involved a couple of hours of education per week, as well as several hours of supervised stretching and aerobic exercises.

"In hindsight, blindly embarking on an intensive exercise program with my family history of heart disease, fitness level and tummy fat was a bit foolhardy," says Tania, whose only visible side effect from the surgery six months down the track is a deep vertical scar on her chest that will fade with time. "If you're very unfit, it's always a good idea to have a medical check-up before pushing yourself too hard on the exercise front."

Tania says she didn't have to make too many lifestyle changes after her health scare, though she is still trying to shed a few kilos and now takes several forms of medication in addition to the blood pressure pills she was already on. She began exercising again in earnest after rehab finished and now jogs and does several boxercise classes per week.

"The only real change I've made is to try not to worry so much about trivial things," says Tania, "to let things wash over me, as my mother likes to say."

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