

## Denise's Story

**“I would like to take this opportunity to share with you how I, at 27 years old, had a stroke.”**

Denise – Biddeford, Maine

Hello, my name is Denise Dyer. I am 28 years old and live in Biddeford. I am here today to tell you a story; a story very important to me. Last spring, I was relocating to Biddeford because my husband and I had just purchased our first home. I needed to find a new pharmacy, and while many of you may not think this is important, it is for those who need to be on certain prescriptions. I needed to find a pharmacy that carried heparin—a fast acting blood thinner—not all pharmacies keep this prescription in stock. I approached the pharmacist, and I asked, “Do you carry heparin?” He moved his head up and down looking at me, and asked, “Why would someone your age need heparin?” I responded, “Because I had a stroke a few months ago.” His mouth fell in amazement.

I hope this story didn't surprise you because that would mean you know that any one of any age can have a stroke. But if it did surprise you, I would like to take this opportunity to share with you how I, at 27 years old, had a stroke.

It was President's Day. I woke up—having a normal kind of day—except that I had the day off due to the holiday. Mid-morning, I took my shower, and when I got out, I felt off balance. I had just gotten over a head cold, so I wasn't too concerned, thinking it might be a bit of vertigo. I decided that I better not drive, so I stayed put. I laid down on the couch to watch TV and fell asleep—at 10 in the morning—after a full night's sleep. I woke about an hour later with a pounding headache. I got up, took some ibuprofen (not good if you are having a stroke), and laid back down. I ended up falling back asleep. My friend called, waking me, saying that she was outside and ready to go to lunch. I told her I would be right out. It took me ten minutes to get the puppy in his crate, put on some jeans, and grab my coat. I felt like I couldn't wake up. In the car with my friend, I could feel my tongue move funny in my mouth—most of us are not aware of our tongue moving across our palette—but I could feel it. My friend started backing up, and I couldn't take it. I asked her to go grab us lunch and bring it back.

As I was walking back in the house, my mother came home. She saw me, and said, “Denise, you are gray. Your mouth is off. I think you have had a stroke. You need to call an ambulance.” I laughed at her. I said, “Mom, I didn't have a stroke.” She said, “Go look at your face.” I did. My mouth was crooked. I looked sick. I felt lethargic. I said, “Mom, I'll go to the



*(Denise's Story, continued)*

hospital, but I won't take an ambulance!" I called my friend, she came and picked me up, and we drove off to the hospital.

At this point, it was after 12:30—I had gotten out of the shower around 9:30-10 a.m. I tell you this because time is of the essence when you have had a stroke. They rushed me right in...my mouth was giving them concern. They took blood and asked me multiple questions. They repeatedly asked me if I smoked. I kept saying, "No." They asked if I was on any drugs or prescriptions. My response was just my birth control pills. All I could tell them was that I didn't feel right, my mouth was crooked, and that I was exhausted. I had an echocardiogram, and upon review, they picked up my patent foramen ovale.

Quick heart history and lesson: When I was born, I had two holes in my heart. Your heart is about the size of a fifty-cent piece when you are born. One hole of mine was the size of a dime (a VSD, a ventricular septal defect) and the other was much smaller. At six weeks old, I had open heart surgery, and had my VSD repaired. The other hole was a PFO, a patent foramen ovale. My whole life I was told this was just a miscommunication and wouldn't give me any problems. A PFO is the hole in every baby's heart while in the womb—it gets oxygenated blood to the brain; however, it usually closes naturally in most babies.

The hospital didn't find this history of my PFO and birth controls prescription a bad mix—why would they? I was a normal 27-year-old with no major health problems. I was too young to have a stroke. I wasn't having problems speaking, raising my hands or walking. I was told I had a virus, and I was sent home.

Once I got home, around 5 p.m., I was exhausted. I felt like I had the fatigue of when you have the flu. I laid in bed to watch TV, and fell asleep with the TV on, the phone ringing and the dog barking. I was awakened by my family at 8 p.m. to eat some dinner. At 8:30, I was back in bed and slept until the next morning.

I woke up feeling fine, but after moving around a bit, I started to feel like I was overcoming the flu again. I decided to follow up with my primary care physician. He didn't feel I had had a stroke either, but with my heart history, he decided to schedule me an MRI. That was Tuesday, my appointment was for Friday. Throughout the week, I drove, went to work (many days falling asleep at my desk and going home early).

After my MRI on that Friday, I learned two things: my husband and I were under contract with our first house and that I had a stroke. I had to go back to the hospital. After multiple tests, and many days in the hospital, I met with my cardiologist. He told me, "Denise, you



*(Denise's Story, continued)*

will not be able to have children because of the blood thinners we need to put you on. These medications can cause harm to the fetus." That was the one thing that threw me—I could deal with a stroke—I could deal with that. I looked at the doctor and said, "That ruins my plans. My plan was to get married, then get a house, and then make babies. This will not stop me."

The Internet is a beautiful thing. I discovered that there was a device on trial called a CardioSeal Septal Occlusion System. I asked my doctors if I could have it, and I got it! I was able to get my heart fixed. I can now have kids without the worry of needing heparin, and my chances of stroke are slim. They were slim before, and I had a stroke. But I am going to take my chances.

Throughout the past year, I have learned a great lesson that I can share with you today. My dear friend, a paramedic sums it up. She said to me, "Denise, my co-workers and I would complain every time we got calls for twenty-somethings with chest pain. You taught me that anyone can have a stroke or heart attack. You don't need to be a fifty-something. You helped me become a better paramedic."

I hope that I have taught you something today as well. If it wasn't for the American Heart and Stroke Association, education and research wouldn't be where it is at today. The Association does more than educate the general public but medical professionals as well. The money raised has touched more than those affected with heart and stroke problems but their families as well.

I hope that you don't dismiss symptoms. I hope that if you are with someone who is experiencing symptoms to ask if they can smile, raise their arms, and speak in full sentences. It is important to know the signs of a stroke. If my mother didn't know the signs, she probably wouldn't have insisted that I go to the hospital. I couldn't smile, but today I can. I stuck to my instincts—even if I was a bit stubborn about it at first. I knew that I was not myself, and that I didn't have the flu. I insisted that something was not right. Don't presume. Know that any of us can have a stroke.

The American Heart Association supports many endeavors around heart health like promoting CPR training, advocating increased AED (automatic defibrillator) access and supporting research to learn more about heart disease.