

This single dad kicked 30-year tobacco habit for his son

August 28 2018



John Jaramillo and his son, Zeph, in 2015. Photo courtesy: John Jaramillo

John Jaramillo was a 45-year-old newly divorced single dad to 7-year-old

Zeph.

As if that weren't enough to deal with, he was also having excruciating pain in his jaw, neck and shoulder.

Having used [tobacco](#) for 30 years, Jaramillo figured that was to blame. So in 2010, he kicked the habit—cold turkey.

"I wanted to live to see Zeph graduate high school, graduate college, get married—all the things a father wants for his son," Jaramillo said.

Tobacco use is a known risk factor for [heart](#) disease. So is a family history, and Jaramillo had that, too. His dad died in 2005 after suffering a [heart attack](#) and stroke. In the ensuing years leading to his decision to quit tobacco, his mother, sister and brother got a combined total of eight cardiac stents implanted. His brother also had his aortic valve replaced.

Three months into his improved lifestyle, Jaramillo was at work with the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority when he started sweating profusely. His heart raced and he was unable to catch his breath.

Thinking he had the flu, he went home. Things only got worse. Around midnight, he went to a nearby emergency room. A nurse said he might be having a heart attack.

"Oh, God, not now," he thought. "Not after I just quit tobacco."

Doctors gave him nitroglycerin under his tongue, by IV and as a paste rubbed on his chest.

It worked.

Once he was stabilized, doctors diagnosed Jaramillo with tachycardia, a condition in which the heart's electrical system goes haywire and starts beating out of control.

And the jaw, neck and shoulder pain that he thought was tobacco-related? He was right. Doctors told him that tobacco use can lead to [heart disease](#) and that tachycardia is an early sign of the condition because it makes the heart unable to reset itself when it starts beating irregularly.

Jaramillo had always been pretty healthy. A veteran of the U.S. Army 82nd Airborne Division, he was a regular runner. However, between the stress of his father's death, his divorce and his family's other health problems, he'd gotten away from following a good diet and getting enough exercise.

"But fortunately, I was given the grace of an early warning," he said.

Released from the hospital after two days, he adopted a new attitude—one rooted in being there for Zeph.

"Today I'm watching my cholesterol, my diet and my weight, and I'm back to running," Jaramillo said. "My health is good and I'm also much more aware of my body. When I run, I pay attention to my heart rate because if it gets too high it can start beating out of control again."

Not only is he helping himself, he's trying to help others, too, as a running trainer.

Zeph is also involved. In 2015, he ran his first half-marathon; he was only 11 years old.

Jaramillo is also not shy about telling his story whenever he has the

chance.

"I try to explain to people that you're not invincible," he said. "The sins of youth—in my case, my tobacco use—will come back and haunt you, and you have to be aware of that."

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Citation: This single dad kicked 30-year tobacco habit for his son (2018, August 28) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-08-dad-year-tobacco-habit-son.html>

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