

Actress Susan Lucci thriving after emergency heart procedure

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As the saleswoman took Susan Lucci's purchases to be wrapped, the

actress felt it again—a tightening in her chest that radiated around her ribcage.

She'd felt something similar twice in recent weeks. Both had been mild enough to dismiss.

This time, Lucci described it as "an elephant pressing on my chest." Using that phrase reminded her of a woman saying the same thing when describing the start of her heart attack.

"Is that what's happening?" she wondered.

Lucci had good reason to wonder.

At 71, she was in such remarkable shape that in recent months *Harper's Bazaar* hailed her as "hotter than ever" and *Women's Health* called her a "fitness badass," a nod to her nearly daily Pilates regimen. Good health also runs in her family; her mom is 101 and still going strong. And, as Lucci stood in that boutique, the only times she'd ever been hospitalized were to give birth to her two children.

Now she was on her way again.

Doctors found blockages clogging nearly 90 percent of the artery that supplies most of the blood to her heart and 75 percent of another artery. A heart attack is a full blockage, so she avoided that. Still, she needed an emergency procedure to insert a stent into each damaged artery.

Thanks to her willingness to seek immediate care, Lucci avoided a potentially fatal result.

Thanks to her [healthy lifestyle](#), she left the hospital the next day—and performed on stage two days after that.

And thanks to the fame she accumulated as Erica Kane on "All My Children," Lucci hopes her story can help others. Just like a survivor's voice spurred her into action, Lucci is encouraging everyone to learn the warning signs of a heart attack and to understand the importance of taking them seriously.

"Nobody has to die of a heart attack," she said. "You just have to listen to your symptoms and act on them."

Warning signs can be different for men and women. They can vary from person to person.

The most common are pain or discomfort in the chest; lightheadedness; nausea or vomiting; pain radiating in the jaw or neck; discomfort or pain in the arm or shoulder; and shortness of breath.

The form they take doesn't matter, said Dr. Richard Shlofmitz, the head of cardiology at St. Francis Hospital on Long Island and Lucci's cardiologist.

What matters, he said, is acknowledging them.

With the warning signs of a heart problem, the only decision should be which phone you use to call 911, he said.

Sometimes people wonder whether they're having a heart problem. Maybe it's indigestion or a pulled muscle. Once the pain subsides, they think it's resolved. Shlofmitz recommends putting the symptoms to a three-prong test:

- Did they flare during exertion (which can be as minimal as shopping)?
- Did they go away at rest?

- Have they occurred more than once?

If the answer to all three is yes, call 911.

"The heart doesn't fix itself," he said.

Lucci wants her message to resonate with women, especially since learning that heart disease is their No. 1 killer, claiming more lives each year than all forms of cancer combined.

"We're not on our own to-do list," she said. "We are nurturing others. That's what we do, and we have places to go and people to see, and we don't think we can fit (caring for ourselves) into our schedules."

She knows women fear overreacting or being a burden because both of those thoughts crossed her mind. She especially lamented "taking this wonderful doctor's time away from someone who really needed him." (As it turned out, Shlofmitz said he sees people in her dire state "probably 2 percent of the time.")

A recent study backs that up. Researchers in Europe found that women having a [heart attack](#) wait about 37 minutes longer than men before calling for medical help.

Ten years ago, Lucci walked the runway in the American Heart Association's Go Red for Women Red Dress Collection fashion show as a celebrity model. On Thursday night, she'll walk the runway again—as a survivor.

Lucci made that connection for the first time during an interview with *American Heart Association News*. Her eyelids fluttered, appearing to blink away tears. With a smile stretched wide, she said, "There's so much gratitude in being a survivor."

Preventing [heart](#) disease is always best, but Lucci's story shows that sometimes it's inevitable.

"I would like women to pay attention to the symptoms that they're feeling—to be in touch with their bodies and to act on those symptoms," she said. "If you think something needs medical attention, pay attention and go to the doctor."

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