

Three generations of women had heart attacks – then she became the fourth

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Heart attack survivor Kendel Christoff in a photo she provided.

In Hubbard, Ohio, a truck-stop town off Interstate 80, Kendel Christoff

had her pick of fast food. One day for lunch, she downed a double cheeseburger with a side of nuggets. The next, it was a roast beef and cheddar sandwich with potato cakes.

At 5 feet and 220 pounds, Christoff knew she had to lose weight, especially since a [poor diet](#) contributed to her great-grandmother, grandmother and mother all having [heart](#) attacks before age 50.

But she was only 32. She told herself she had plenty of time to shed the extra pounds. Plus, she did Zumba, walked and regularly went to the gym.

"I thought, if you exercise, it's magic," Christoff said. "I wasn't thinking about my overall health and well-being, and I certainly wasn't monitoring my [heart rate](#)."

Seven years ago, she drove home from Zumba class, smoked a cigarette and went to bed. At 5:30 a.m., she woke up nauseous and drenched in sweat. The mother of two hobbled across her bedroom and curled up on the bathroom floor, convinced she'd caught a stomach bug.

When she crawled back into bed, her jaw began to hurt. It was a [heart attack](#) symptom she learned about in the 1990s from the American Heart Association. Christoff had participated in an AHA Heart Walk after her grandmother died from heart failure.

Still, in bed that night, she didn't think she was having a heart attack.

But then her shoulders tensed, and her teeth started to hurt. Finally, the tips of her fingers went numb, a symptom she remembered from her mother, who had a heart attack at 41 and then a stroke.

"That's when I knew I was really in trouble," Christoff said.

In the ER, she couldn't breathe. An electrocardiogram showed her right coronary artery was 100% blocked. She needed a stent to restore blood flow.

During a [cardiac catheterization procedure](#), a nurse told Christoff to watch a screen as the doctor called out, "Ballooning the stent." The image went from stagnant to active.

"It was my heart coming back to life," she said.

Afterward, she struggled with "that constant cloud over your head that it could happen again."

"I've had my share of sitting on the kitchen floor in tears," said Christoff, who has sought support from mental health and wellness groups for survivors.

She committed to a [healthy diet](#) and regular exercise—and she pledged to help other young people realize they're not immune to heart attacks by sharing her story at Heart Walks.

She feared going back to Zumba. At her first class, she wore her heart monitor. That night, she frequently checked her blood pressure.

"When it didn't kill me, I thought maybe I should teach this," she said. So, she became a certified instructor.

Healthy eating is now a family affair, with her daughters, Cora, 15, and Carmen, 13.

"The best thing about a heart-healthy diet is that anyone can be on it," Christoff said. "Nutrition has made such a huge difference in how I feel."

So much so that nine months after her heart attack, Christoff went back to study nutrition and dietetics. The day she took her test to become a registered dietitian—also the anniversary of her heart attack—she found a clinical nutritionist opening at the hospital where she'd been treated. She got the job.

"I've come full circle," she said.

Now, she imparts her newfound nutrition knowledge with patients like herself. Cheat days are OK, she said. But "when you're eating poorly every day, it's just not benefiting your body."

She hopes that by modeling a [healthy lifestyle](#) for her daughters, she can stop the cycle, keeping them from becoming the fifth generation to have a heart attack.

"It's changed our life and our outlook," said her husband, Mike. "You learn how to be more proactive instead of reactive. We take better care of ourselves."

Christoff said prevention is the key. "It's 1,000 times harder to survive a disease than to prevent it, and this is very much preventable."

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