

“I’m proof you *can* live a happy, healthy life!”

Surviving a heart attack gave Jenny Petz a precious second chance—and she’s using it to help other women learn the risks of high cholesterol. —BY KAREN KLEIMANN

Looking at Jenny Petz, one would never suspect she was anything but an athlete. Whether biking in her Omaha, NE, neighborhood in the summer, skiing in Colorado in the winter, working out or chasing after toddlers in her day care center, the mom of two is always on the move. It’s a testament to how far she’s come considering she survived a heart attack 12 years ago.

“I have gained such appreciation for life and taken the world by storm,” she says. “I couldn’t love life more!”

But there was a time she feared her heart would prevent her from living the life she wanted.

“I had a heart attack?”

On January 3, 2008, what should have been a magical time of bonding and celebration with Jenny’s second child, eight-day-old son Kai, became the start of a two-year health journey. While at home nursing Kai, Jenny’s left arm suddenly went numb and she could feel her throat closing up. As the then-32-year-old struggled to stand, she called her mom for help

before collapsing on the floor. The paramedics came, and Jenny, who had regained consciousness, was rushed to the hospital.

“I was terrified. I knew something was horribly wrong—I’d never experienced this before,” she says, explaining she had no issues when pregnant with her daughter, Maile.

An EKG showed Jenny had a spontaneous coronary artery dissection (SCAD)—i.e., a tear in an artery that triggered a heart attack. They also found two blocked arteries, one at 98%, due to high cholesterol. Looking back, she realized there had been signs of an impending heart attack—unusual fatigue, throat closing and shortness of breath—but she chalked it up to being pregnant.

Although SCAD isn’t typically associated with high cholesterol, her doctors believed the blockages put extra pressure on her heart and arteries during pregnancy, ultimately leading to her heart attack.

“When you’re pregnant, your heart has to work overtime, but mine had to work *extra* extra hard because one of my arteries was blocked, so it was a time bomb waiting to go off,”

says Jenny. “Just because I was trim and felt good didn’t mean my heart and arteries were healthy.”

“Lifestyle changes—and a treatment adjustment—gave me peace of mind”

After leaving the hospital, Jenny was prescribed various medications and started a supervised exercise program and diet plan to get her heart and arteries back in shape. It proved a challenging recovery.

“I worried I couldn’t be there for my kids the way I was supposed to, so there was a lot of guilt,” she says. “And even though I became a vegetarian and was weighing all my food so I didn’t overeat, it didn’t make a difference. My body just doesn’t get rid of the LDL or bad cholesterol very well. I felt like a failure.”

Pretty soon her anxiety became full-on panic attacks. She worried

exercise would tax her heart, and the fear was taking a toll on all areas of her life.

Finally, she reached out to her care team for help. Her doctor assured her that being active would actually help her heart and encouraged her to embrace exercise. And even though her cholesterol-lowering medication was helping, it wasn’t bringing her levels down as much as desired, so a switch was in order. Jenny now takes a type of statin that, along with exercise and diet, helps lower her LDL cholesterol as well as a low-dose blood pressure medication. To reduce her anxiety and stress, she takes medication and meditates every day.

“I’ve made leaps and bounds in my life, including in my relationships,” says Jenny, who found love after a divorce and has since created a fulfilling life with her partner of nine years,

“I believe I am here for a reason and that’s to serve as an example to others going through what I did,” says Jenny (right) with her partner, Jac (left) and son, Kai.

Jac, Maile, 16 and Kai, 12. “Life is too short to be anything but happy.”

“I’m a new person!”

This past January, Jenny happily celebrated her 12th SCADversary and for more than a decade has helped spread the word on women and heart disease.

Her efforts haven’t gone unnoticed, either. In addition to connecting with other heart attack survivors on Facebook, Jenny partners with the American Heart Association (AHA) and was recently named a Go Red for Women’s Real Women volunteer.

“I believe I am here for a reason and that’s to serve as an example,” says Jenny. “There’s a misconception that because you had a heart attack you now have an 80-year-old heart in your 30-year-old body and can’t live the same way as everyone else. I’m proof that you can live a happy, active life!”

“I’m living my best life despite high cholesterol!”

Check out Jenny’s tips on being heart-healthy, and ask your healthcare provider if they are right for you, too!

Learn your family history.

After doing research, Jenny learned she had likely had high cholesterol most of her life and that it runs in her family. “I was very thin, active, ate well and never smoked. My family didn’t realize anyone, at any age, could have high cholesterol. But a lot more women have heart attacks than people think, and the side effects are often different and vague in women. That’s why it’s so important to know your numbers and get tested.”

Let go of dread.

“It’s easy to get down after a heart episode and live in fear and anxiety, but that’s not how it should be. Don’t be ashamed to reach out for help and do what you can to get your spirits up,” says Jenny. “Once I got through that cloud, things have been really great on the other side.”

Eat mindfully.

After trying different diets, Jenny now focuses on the mantra of everything in moderation. “I watch my salt intake and cholesterol-raising foods like eggs and red meat, but I’m not crazy about my diet anymore. I work with my doctor, follow the AHA guidelines and am mindful of how much I’m eating—I don’t deny myself anything but don’t overindulge either.”

