

# SURVIVING AND MOVING FORWARD WITH HEART FAILURE

## John's Story



A self-described “gym rat,” John says his family history of heart disease caught up with him five years ago when he was diagnosed with heart failure. After surgery and working closely with his team of doctors to manage his condition, John is back in the gym and trying to help other people coping with heart disease.

He volunteers to visit patients in the hospital, telling them his story to show there’s hope and, importantly life, after a heart failure diagnosis. John shares his diagnosis story and the advice he offers to others facing heart failure.

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## When did you learn you had heart failure?

A few weeks before Thanksgiving in 2016, I felt a little weaker than normal when I was lifting weights at the gym, but I didn’t think too much of it. However, the alarms started to go off when I went to Thanksgiving dinner at my sister’s house. The first thing she noticed when she saw me was that my feet and ankles were very swollen. I was holding onto water weight, and she told me I needed to go to the hospital.

She’d been with my dad when he had quadruple bypass years ago, and she was worried about my swelling. I drove to the hospital the next day on Black Friday and the intake nurse took one look at me and said, “heart failure.” Turns out I’d had a heart attack earlier that week and I was indeed in heart failure.

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## How did you react to this news?

My family has a history of heart disease, so I knew what I was facing. I’m the oldest of 6 and my brothers and sisters, and my dad, all developed heart disease around the age of 60. Knowing my risk, I worked hard at staying fit, which is why I was really surprised when I was diagnosed with heart failure at the age of 69. I guess I was hoping my 5-day-a-week gym routine would keep my heart healthy, but heredity plays a big role in heart disease.

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## How did your life change after your heart failure diagnosis?

For starters, I had to work with my doctors on a treatment plan. A doctor recommended triple bypass surgery, but cautioned that it may be risky. I went with that option because I wanted to take immediate action. I made it through the surgery, but it was a major recovery process with cardiac rehab.

Pushing myself to get better after my surgery, I was slowly able to get back into being more active. I didn’t have to change my diet too much because I always watched what I ate, but I did lower my salt intake as the dieticians recommended. I kept up the pace, my ejection fraction has improved, and I’m pretty close to where I was prior to my diagnosis.

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## What advice do you give to other people with heart failure?

Since I was diagnosed, I started volunteering with 2 organizations that helped me through surgery and rehab. The first is Mended Hearts®, which sends people like me to visit cardiac patients in the hospital. My dad also volunteered with them following his heart failure diagnosis and recovery. The second is a group that helps veterans get to their appointments at the VA hospital. In these roles, I talk to patients after they’ve been diagnosed, when they’re the most scared and trying to understand all the information they’re receiving.

I share my story—what I went through and what worked for me. The most important thing I tell them is not to give up. I tell them I’m like Don Quixote and I keep tilting at the windmills. I don’t expect to knock them all down, but I get a win every once in a while, and they will, too. They just have to keep pushing forward.

I really enjoy this work. It’s very gratifying to talk to these families. I think my story adds another important layer to all of the information they’re receiving from their cardiologist and surgeons. When I was in their shoes, it helped to know that other people had gone through something similar. So, that’s why I keep sharing my own experiences and offering encouragement. There is life after a heart failure diagnosis if you work with your doctor and make the necessary lifestyle changes to improve your symptoms, and I want people to know that.