

When exhaustion is something more serious

One OSF HealthCare patient is urging people to know the signs of a heart attack

A survivor of a 2019 heart attack, Randy Isham was already on notice.

But Randy and his wife Dawn, retirees in Mansfield, Illinois, couldn't predict the chaotic events of May 24, 2023. An ambulance took Randy to OSF HealthCare Heart of Mary Medical Center in nearby Urbana, and the man was soon fighting for his life due to a second heart attack.

"I'm glad to be alive," Randy puts it plainly.

The Ishams and their OSF care team have now joined the chorus of heart health advocates, urging others to know when everyday exhaustion or dehydration is something more serious, especially if you have a history of heart issues.

From garage to gurney

On May 24, Randy was assembling a table in the garage when he began to feel weak but had no pain.

"When I touched his arm, it was a cold sweat," Dawn recalls. "That's when I got concerned that this didn't seem right. Let's call 9-1-1."

It was in the ambulance that first responders determined Randy was having a [heart attack](#). That's when the flow of oxygen-rich blood to the heart is narrowed or blocked. Heart cells begin to suffer damage and die, and the heart no longer works how it should. Serious, life-long health issues or even death can result.

Randy coded at the hospital, adding to the urgency.

"It means there is no pulse. The heart stops. There is no blood reaching the brain and the whole body," explains Tariq Enezate, MD, one of Randy's OSF cardiologists. "When that happens, you need to know why and act fast."

As the hospital pastoral care team and other Mission Partners (employees) kept Dawn informed, Randy was fighting for his life. He was without a pulse for 20 minutes, Dawn says, before Dr. Enezate's team was able to revive him. Along the way, they removed a blood clot stemming from plaque buildup that they believe was the source of the heart attack. They then put in a stent. Randy is up to three stents, he points out, after his 2019 heart attack. It's something he can speak about with relative ease now, but the nine-day hospital stay was no laughing matter.

"It could have gone either way," Dawn says. "They wanted me to call the family in."

Dr. Enezate describes the scene: "I had to go inside his heart while they were doing chest compressions. I was able to open [the blocked area in] his heart. At that moment, blood flow started back to the heart, and his pulse came back.

"Minutes mean muscle," during heart attacks, Dr. Enezate adds. "The faster you restore flow in the artery and put a stent in, it's better for the patient. It relieves their pain. It decreases the risk of complications."

Lessons learned

Dr. Enezate calls Randy his miracle patient, and the Ishams agree.

"It was lucky he made it," Dr. Enezate says. "I think the fact he came in early helped him.

"When we saw him coming back, that moment I can't describe. It's worth the world for all of us," he adds.

Dr. Enezate's affirmations "just gave me a nice warm feeling," Randy says.

"Everybody there treated me like I was the only patient they had," he adds, noting daily visits from Pastor Dave Jassman gave the couple strength.

Randy is back at home, doing well and receiving care typical for people who have suffered a major heart event, like therapy through OSF Home Care and cardiac rehabilitation. And he and Dawn are back at the healthy lifestyles that became the norm after Randy's 2019 heart attack. Exercise is good, but no long work periods in the summer heat, for

example. You'll find Dawn cooking fish instead of steak. A tough, but necessary adjustment, Randy chuckles. Recipes from the [American Heart Association](#) also help.

"I used to think I was invincible, but I realize I'm not anymore," Randy says.

The Ishams are also urging others to research trusted sources and learn not just the signs of a heart attack, but how to tell the difference between those signs and everyday pain like Randy thought he had on May 24. And don't hesitate to call 9-1-1 when something is wrong.

"It could save your life," Dawn says.

Dr. Enezate says the classic symptom of a heart attack is chest pain. Some people describe it as an elephant weighing on their chest. You may also be short of breath, sweat, feel anxious or feel like you're going to pass out. Or you may have no warning signs, and suddenly you've collapsed.

"If you have symptoms and you're not sure why, call [a health care provider] for advice," Dr. Enezate advises.

What about prevention for people who've had a heart attack?

Practice healthy habits, Dr. Enezate says. Don't smoke. Take medication as directed by your provider. Control risk factors like diabetes, blood pressure and cholesterol. Exercise and eat right.

Learn more

Read more about how to care for your heart on the [OSF HealthCare website](#).