



PAULA RICE, AHA NATIONAL SPOKESWOMAN

AMERICAN HEART ASSOCIATION

Million Hearts in Action

[Strategies for Achieving Million Hearts Goals]

It took Paula Rice's heart to stop before she finally started listening to her body.

She had spent eight years as a fulltime caregiver for a mother struggling with dementia, devoting all of her physical and emotional energy to her mom's wellbeing. After her mother passed away, Paula continued to ignore her own health needs, instead switching her focus to a new job and career.

"I stopped exercising and wasn't eating that well," Paula said. "I think I was just stressed and depressed after going through the care-giving experience."

In 2013, she dismissed lingering symptoms of nausea and fatigue to a stubborn virus that passed through her office. But after finding herself completely winded from climbing the subway stairs, she headed to the Emergency Room. There, she learned her heart rate was dangerously high. Hours later, Paula went into atrial fibrillation and had a cardiac arrest. Her heart stopped for 15 minutes.

Paula spent more than a month in the hospital, as doctors performed a cardiac ablation and worked to get her heart back into a healthy rhythm.

That's when Paula knew she had to finally make herself a priority. She also started advocating for others to educate themselves about their health and medical history. She especially encouraged women to put themselves first more often.

“In order to advocate, I can't have another heart attack and get sick. It's really important to focus on myself now so I can continue to be a success story and an example.”

– Paula Rice

[Fast Facts]

- Cardiovascular disease often affects women and men differently. One study showed that nearly two-thirds of women who died suddenly of coronary heart disease, versus half of men, experienced no previous symptoms.¹
- Women's heart attack symptoms can differ dramatically from men's. The most common symptom for both genders is chest pain or discomfort. But women are more likely to experience other common symptoms, particularly shortness of breath, nausea, and back or jaw pain.²
- Researchers have identified gender differences in response to cardiac medications. Drugs beneficial for men may be harmful to women.³

¹Heart Disease & Stroke Statistics – 2016 Update, p e258

²Heart Disease & Stroke Statistics – 2016 Update, p e257

³McSweeney JC, Cody M, O'Sullivan P, Elberson K, Moser DK, Garvin BJ. Women's early warning symptoms of acute myocardial infarction. *Circulation* 2003; 108:2619- 2623.

[What She Did]

- **Returned to old (and healthier) habits:** Paula used to be a yoga and meditation enthusiast. She also watched what she ate. “So I tried to return to some of that, by eating more healthy and getting back into some stretching and Pilates and yoga. I also started doing some walking meditation.”
- **Got involved:** It started with a January 2014 fundraiser at her home for the American Heart Association shortly after her release from the hospital, where she had spent her birthday. She called the event her “rebirth-day” party.
- **Advocated for wellness exams:** Paula encourages everyone to schedule an annual physical exam, which is covered by most insurance plans under the federal Affordable Care Act. “There’s no reason not to take advantage of that. It could save your life.”
- **Shared her story. Repeatedly.** First as an American Heart Association Ambassador, Paula now educates people about the impact of heart disease as a national spokeswoman:
 - She was part of AHA’s [Go Red’s Real Women 2016 campaign](#) to raise awareness about heart disease among women.
 - [Women’s Day magazine featured Paula](#) in a 2016 profile about three heart disease survivors: “The Heart-Health Wakeup Call that Saved My Life.”
- **Become proactive:** Paula regularly monitors her blood pressure and always follows up on her medical exams. She also insists on seeing her doctors in person following tests. “If everything is fine, they usually don’t tell you anything, so I’m very pro-active about sitting down with the doctor so he can go over the numbers with me. I always encourage everyone: Know your numbers and exactly what they mean.”

[What She Accomplished]

By sharing her story, Paula helped represent a different, feminine side of heart disease not as well known in the public. She also helped inspire other women to become more proactive about their own health.

“Women take care of everybody – children, their parents, other people’s children, pets. You name it, we take care of everything and everyone, and we really have to be a little more selfish,” she said. “We have to focus on our own health and be our own priority, or we won’t be around to help others.”

[What She Learned]

- **To explore family history:** Paula grew up with a diabetic father but she only recently learned that cardiac arrest also runs in her family. “It’s important to know your family history. If you don’t, start asking around.”
- **Heart disease symptoms often differ for women:** Paula experienced symptoms common for women, including shortness of breath and nausea.³ “I always pictured a man having a heart attack with pain in their chest and shooting down their arm. And those weren’t those my symptoms at all.”



⁴Heart Disease & Stroke Statistics – 2016 Update, p e257