

In July 2019, Kelly Burch began suffering what she assumed was simple stomach pain. This wasn't an unusual occurrence for her—she'd had gastric bypass surgery in 2017 and would experience discomfort if she ate too much.

But the pain eventually moved into her chest and down her arms and legs. And she began experiencing waves of nausea and had trouble breathing. She called 911 and was transported to the ER. In the ambulance, she heard the EMT's use the words "heart attack."

After a stint in the ICU, Burch was diagnosed with small vessel disease or coronary microvascular disease, which affects the small vessels in the heart and can be hard to spot. She began a medication protocol and recently completed cardiac therapy which involved exercise sessions three days a week for several weeks.

"It's also the kick start I need to get into a healthy exercise routine," she said. In January she's due for her next checkup, and she's feeling strong.

"I expect to hear that I'm doing well and that my chances of a reoccurrence are very slim," Burch said. "I feel really good and have had no issues since leaving the hospital or during exercise."

Burch has had mixed emotions as she's dealt with the reality of having a heart attack.

"At first I was in denial. How could I have had a heart attack but not feel any different?" she said. "Then I was angry I'd gone through the gastric bypass surgery and weight loss to avoid something like this happening. But I soon concluded that if I hadn't done it, the recent outcome might have been much worse. It's still hard to believe it happened at all."

Burch, who turned 60 in December, wants to stay as healthy as she can as she heads toward retirement age, and hopes her story inspires others to take their health seriously.

"This was a reminder that I'm not invincible and I need to do everything I can to make my golden years just that," she said. "I don't want to live forever, but I want to live well."