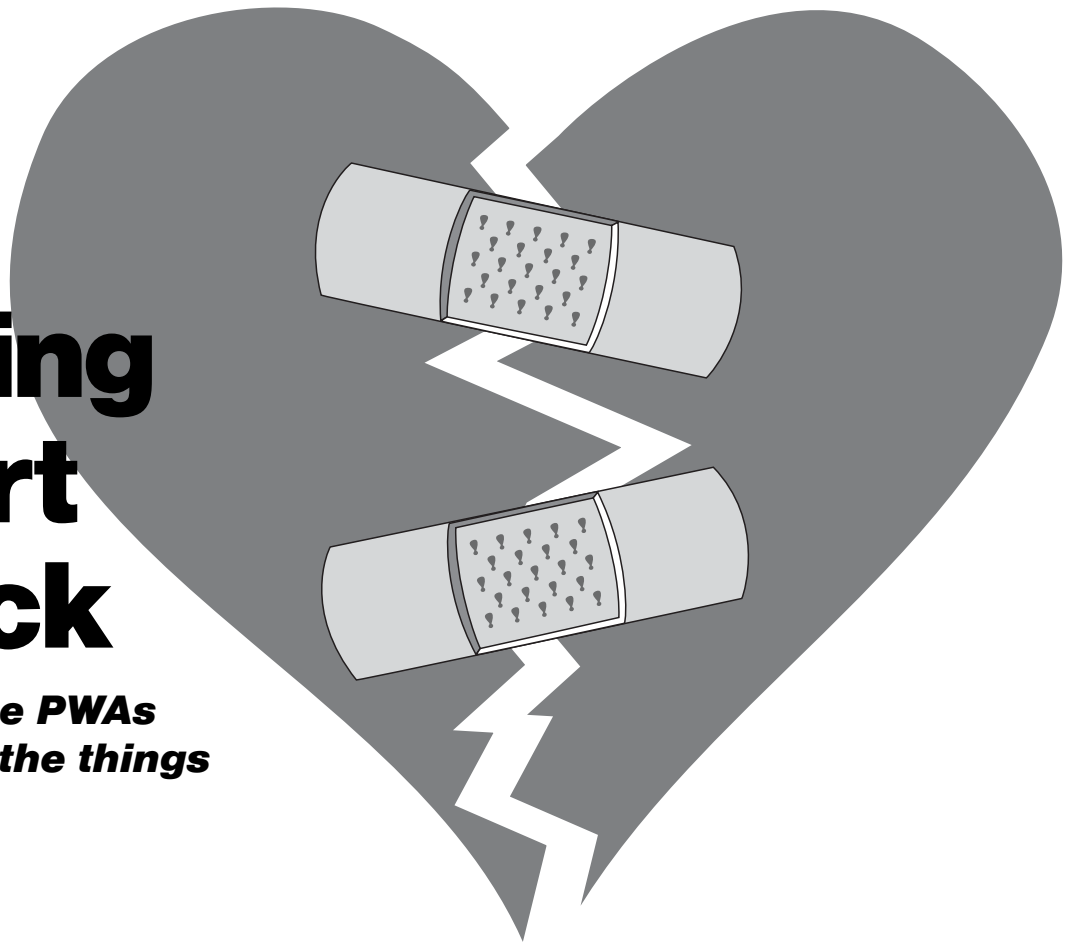




Surviving a heart attack

The stories of three PWAs highlight some of the things you should know

by Zoran Stjepanovic



Cardiovascular problems are on the rise among people with HIV. Part of that is due to the fact that more and more PWAs are living longer and thus getting older. However, there's conflicting information whether your HIV medications increase your risk of heart problems. Some studies show a risk of heart attack with protease inhibitors, while other studies have shown no greater likelihood of a heart attack with antiretrovirals.

A number of BCPWA members have had heart attacks in recent months. The stories of three of these members provide first-hand insight into how to recognize the signs, what to do in such a situation, and how to survive.

“Like something was pressing against it”

Ramon is a treatment information volunteer with BCPWA. One day last year, Ramon felt a lot of pain in his chest. “It felt like something was pressing against it,” he says. The pain caused discomfort, and it wouldn't subside even when he tried resting. When he began to sweat and feel nauseous, he realized he was experiencing a heart attack.

Because Ramon had read that aspirin is beneficial when experiencing a heart attack, he took an aspirin and called 911. Aspirin can be used as a first aid measure for heart attacks. When the paramedics arrived, they sprayed nitrate in his mouth. Nitrate sprays work to open up the arteries to the heart, increasing blood flow and relieving chest pain. When he

arrived at the hospital, Ramon was diagnosed with a massive blockage and soon after had surgery to clear the blockage. After a few days, he felt well enough to go home.

Ramon's cardiologist placed him on three different medications: beta blockers, ace inhibitors, and statins (lipid lowering drugs). Beta blockers can be used to treat high blood pressure, abnormal heart rhythms, and chest pain. Ace inhibitors are also a common treatment for people with heart problems.

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Ramon's recovery also involved attending the Healthy Heart Program at St. Paul's Hospital in Vancouver, where he obtained nutritional advice and was expected to exercise twice a week for four months. “I had increased energy after only one month in the program,” he says. The Healthy Heart Program also provided regular monitoring of his condition. He's now fully recovered.



Since his heart attack, Ramon has undergone a lifestyle change: he exercises more often and eats a healthier diet. That means no junk food. He also stresses the importance of taking aspirin when having a heart attack, as this may reduce the severity of the heart attack.

When asked what he thinks caused his heart attack, Ramon attributes it to the high level of stress that he was experiencing at the time.

Recognize the warning signs of a heart attack

- Pain that spreads from the chest to the back, neck, jaw, upper abdomen, or one or both shoulders or arms (the left shoulder and arm are more commonly affected)
- Sweating
- Shortness of breath
- Nausea or vomiting
- Dizziness or light-headedness
- A fast, slow, or irregular heartbeat
- If you have any of these symptoms, call 911 immediately. Don't wait—heart damage is permanent.

A progressively intensive exercise program

Colin is another BCPWA member who had a heart attack recently. At the time of the attack, he experienced a lot of pressure on his chest—as if someone was sitting on his chest—and he had difficulty breathing. Colin didn't experience the other symptoms such as sweating or nausea. When he went to his doctor, blood work revealed that he had some recent heart damage, so they sent him directly to emergency.

Doctors performed an angiogram, a procedure used to widen narrowed coronary arteries, with three stents (metal tubes) installed to open up his blood vessels, which were severely blocked (up to 97 percent). After his surgery, Colin had to go on numerous medications, including: beta blockers; lipitor, a cholesterol-lowering drug; hydrochlorothiazide, a water pill; ramipril to lower blood pressure; and niaspan.

Colin also underwent a lifestyle change. As soon as it was advisable, he joined the Healthy Heart Program at St. Paul's Hospital, where a crew of well-trained staff placed him on a progressively intensive cardio and weight-training exercise program. Colin stayed with that program for three months and then developed his own exercise program.

Colin now works out three times a week. At 63 years of age, "I'm feeling better than ever," he says. "My cardiologist told me that I did better on a stress test than most young people out of high school."

Colin doesn't think his heart attack was medication related, since his triglyceride and cholesterol levels were normal. He

suspects the clogged arteries may have been the result of many years of eating a high-fat diet.

A heart attack in his sleep

Bobby's situation was much more complicated: he was asleep at St. Paul's Hospital, undergoing treatment for viral pneumonia, when he had his heart attack. He had been rushed to emergency suffering from a fever, vomiting, and diarrhea—but no chest pain at that time. "I think maybe my high level of anxiety while I was in emergency could have caused my heart attack," he says. When he was admitted, he needed full ventilation to help him breathe. He was on ventilation for a week, and stayed in the hospital for 22 days, 16 of those in intensive care or the cardiac care unit.

Bobby didn't need surgery for his heart; instead he was given lipid-lowering medication and blood thinners, as well as antibiotics for the pneumonia. He continues to take these medications. Bobby also made some lifestyle changes, such as eating a healthier diet, getting more fresh air, and exercising. However, he hasn't been able to quit smoking.

Though Bobby has recovered from his heart attack, the pneumonia has recurred. Recently, he fell asleep on his arm, which caused neuropathy. When he awoke, his heart was pumping fast so he called his doctor. Thankfully, it wasn't a heart attack. But these days he's definitely paying more attention to his heart, and to his overall health.

Knowing the signs of a heart attack and contacting 911 immediately are keys to survival. Having a heart attack doesn't have to be fatal. As these three men reveal, you can go on to live an active, full life. Better yet, don't wait until you have a heart attack; be proactive, start living that healthier lifestyle now. Read the articles on the following pages and find out how. 📍



Zoran Stjepanovic is BCPWA's treatment information coordinator.

Are women's symptoms different?

According to a US National Institute of Health study, women may experience different physical heart attack symptoms than men. The research revealed that women noted new or different symptoms—most notably unusual fatigue, sleep disturbances, and shortness of breath—a month or more before they had their heart attacks.

That said, chest pain is the most important heart attack symptom in both women and men. One key difference, however, is that women may describe their pain differently than men, according to the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada.