

# Knowing the Symptoms of a Heart Attack Saved One Young Mother's Life

Nicole is a thirty-two-year-old, wife and new mother who did everything right. She made it a point to exercise and eat healthy. Despite her efforts to live a healthy life, Nicole found herself at Duke University Hospital after suffering a heart attack.

On Memorial Day Weekend, 2017, Nicole woke to feed her seven-week-old son. She then returned to her bedroom to lay down. Almost immediately, she started experiencing chest pain that radiated to her jaw. Subsequently, her left arm went numb. In the past, Nicole had experienced panic attacks. She initially believed she was having another panic attack, though “these were all sensations [she] had never really had before.” She knew something was wrong.



With her husband by her side, she headed to a nearby urgent care center. Once there, she had an EKG to measure the electrical activity of her heart. The results were abnormal. The abnormal EKG combined with an extremely high blood pressure reading prompted the urgent care center to send Nicole to the nearest emergency room.

Nicole arrived at Duke University Hospital Emergency Room shortly after. Initially her physicians believed what Nicole had believed – that she had experienced a panic attack. Following several tests, it was quickly proven that Nicole had in fact had a heart attack, more specifically, she had a Spontaneous Coronary Artery Dissection (SCAD).

SCAD is an uncommon type of heart attack. It occurs when there is a tear in one of the blood vessels in the heart. The tear can slow or block blood flow to the heart, causing a heart attack. Most often, SCAD affects women in their 40s and 50s, although Nicole was only 32 at the time of her heart attack. Usually, SCAD affects healthy adults who have no risk factors of heart disease. Nicole explains, “It was really shocking to everyone because I am extremely healthy. I exercise and eat right.”

**“To have a heart attack knowing that you have done everything right is a little disconcerting.”**

Unbeknownst to Nicole, despite choosing to live a healthy lifestyle, she was still at risk for this type of heart attack. Two of the main risk factors for SCAD are first being female, and second recently giving birth.

**“You know your body better than anyone else”**

than anyone else and if you feel something that you have never felt before, then it is worth getting checked out”.

After spending one day in the cardiac intensive care unit and one day in the cardiac wing of the hospital, Nicole was released to go home. Today, nearly 9 months after her heart attack, Nicole is living life as normally as

**“Telling someone who just had a heart attack not to stress is kind of funny, I suppose.”**

women, Nicole was advised to not get pregnant again. Nicole explains, “any subsequent pregnancies would be extremely high-risk and could cause heart attack in the same fashion.”

Nicole has joined a support group for women living with heart disease at Duke University Hospital. She hopes to spread knowledge of SCAD to women in the hospital who have recently given birth.

She was lucky enough to know the signs of heart attack before her episode, but many women may not have that knowledge when they need it. One of Nicole’s biggest pieces of advice to other women who may experience similar symptoms is to seek medical attention and be an advocate for your own health. She states, “you know your body better

she can. She still eats well, and exercises when able. Her primary focus regarding her SCAD episode is to remain as stress-free as possible. Nicole credits her husband for her ability to remain stress-free. He is her “best support system.”



Because SCAD is more common in post-partum

- More information on [SCAD](#).
- SCAD facts: <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/spontaneous-coronary-artery-dissection/symptoms-causes/syc-20353711>