



'Flu damaged my heart'

After returning from Athens in 2002 with a virus, Rebecca Sharp, 30, became one of the increasing number of young women in danger of suffering a cardiac arrest

Words Andréa Childs **Photographs** Bettina von Kameke

It was April 2002, when I caught the virus that changed the way I think about my health forever. At the time, I simply thought it was an attack of flu. I was in Athens for four days, visiting my best friend. The day after I arrived, I began to snifle, and felt dreadful the following morning. My back ached, I felt light-headed and hot, and my eyes wouldn't focus. My friend gave me a back massage, and I took two paracetamol and went out. After a few glasses of Ouzo, I livened up and, perversely, considering what was to happen next, had one of my most enjoyable nights ever.

I still felt unwell when I arrived home in the UK, but not enough to keep me off work from my job on a national newspaper. I went on with life as usual – eating as healthily as any busy young person in London can do (some fruit and vegetables, but probably not enough meat and fish), drinking with my friends and, though I wasn't a regular smoker, having four or five cigarettes socially. I went to the gym every other day, jogged a couple of times a week and cycled half an hour to work and back most days. I thought I was pretty fit but, looking back, I probably downplayed how much stress I was under. I'd recently moved from an administrative position to the newsroom and would often work until 11.30pm.

'I'd feel my heart racing, my vision would go dark and I'd become dizzy'

It wasn't until June, two months after my return from Athens, that I began to notice that something was wrong. I started to have heart palpitations a couple of times a week. It would happen when I'd stand up after sitting at my desk for a while; I'd feel my heart racing in my chest, my vision would go dark and I'd become dizzy. I blamed it on the strong coffee I was drinking and wasn't too concerned, until the autumn, when the frantic pounding of my heart started waking me up. The attacks intensified and began to happen three or four times a day, but even so, I didn't visit my GP until January 2003 – life just got in the way. My doctor thought my symptoms could have been caused by a number of illnesses and arranged some tests.

I had an ECG test to record the rhythm of my heart and an echocardiogram – similar to a pregnancy ultrasound – which shows

pictures of your heart on a screen. But nothing showed up, because I wasn't having palpitations at the time. So, in June, I was referred to the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital for a 24-hour ECG. I was hooked up to a portable machine on my belt, with six little suckers on my chest, and told to go about my usual day. I remember feeling relieved when I felt my heart racing, because I knew that, finally, there was a record of what was happening to me.

A few days after the test, I received an urgent call from the hospital; I had to go in straight away. I asked if I could leave it until Monday, but the doctor's tone was serious and I began to feel worried. I later found out that the ECG results had shown my heart had been racing at 240 beats per minute, instead of the normal resting heart rate of 65 beats per minute, which put me in danger of sudden death. I could go into cardiac arrest at any time.

At the hospital, I was taken to an acute cardiac ward. There was an elderly man there with a pacemaker and chest pain. I described to him how my heart raced and he told me he'd felt exactly the same. I thought, "Is this it? In a couple of days I might have a pacemaker, too." It was terrifying, especially when a man was later rushed in having a heart attack. It was like a scene from *Casualty*. "This man is going to die right next to me," I thought. I felt like I shouldn't be there: my symptoms indicated a serious heart condition, but most of the time I felt fine.

I spent five days in hospital, seeing different doctors, trying to find out what was wrong with me. I was put on medication to control my heart's rhythms, and injected in my stomach with a drug to prevent my blood clotting. I was diagnosed with ventricular tachycardia, a dangerously fast heartbeat that can lead to cardiac arrest. My heart was enlarged and there was scarring on the muscle, which doctors say

could have been caused by the virus.

When I got back home, I was too nervous to sleep alone for a few days. I felt vulnerable – I was sent home, with no clear explanation about what happened. I would lie in bed at night, trying to work out whether my heart was beating normally.

The following six months were a round of further tests and medication, while they narrowed down what had happened to me. I convinced myself that my lifestyle was to blame, so I tried to do everything I could to strengthen my heart, eating lots of fish and garlic, and reducing stress. The doctors said I shouldn't do any intense exercise – I'd just started rowing but was told it was too dangerous. Instead, I did yoga and lots of walking.

By January 2004, doctors said my heart had recovered and I stopped medication. The verdict was that I'd had myocarditis – inflammation of the heart muscle caused by a virus. In 70 per cent of cases, myocarditis doesn't cause any damage to the heart and symptoms may even go unnoticed, but I was one of the 30 per cent of sufferers who do experience problems. The damage to my heart occurred because I'd refused to stop when I was ill, but the enforced rest had given it time to heal. I was lucky – 10 per cent of people whose hearts are damaged by myocarditis go on to have heart failure and may even die without warning.

Today, my heart is healthy and my life is back to normal; I've even started rowing again. I'd gone



MYOCARDITIS: THE FACTS

- What:** An inflammatory disease of the heart, often caused by a viral infection. It usually affects 5,000 people a year.
- Symptoms:** Flu-like aches and pains, a rapid heartbeat, breathlessness, chest pain and tiredness. If you have these symptoms and have had a virus, call your GP. If symptoms are severe, go to A & E.
- Protect yourself:** Make sure you get adequate rest if you contract an infection; limit alcohol to one or two drinks a day, at most; maintain immunisations before travel; avoid salt and over-exercising.

through life taking this major organ for granted, but all of a sudden I was listening to it pounding on a monitor, thinking, "Thank God I can hear it, but please, don't let it stop working." ■

For further information on heart disease, contact (020) 7349 8686; corda.org.uk, or heratheart.org.uk

HEART DISEASE: SHOULD I CARE?

In this special report, *Red* has used the term 'heart disease' to encompass a range of heart conditions. These include coronary heart disease (CHD), which causes blood clots in the heart vessels and can lead to heart failure, as well as cardiovascular disease – a blanket term for many other heart conditions, including myocarditis (Rebecca's condition) and stroke – all of which are now affecting more women in their thirties and forties.

Young women and heart disease.

'There are no official figures for women under 45 with heart disease,' says Dr Vahini Naidoo, a nuclear cardiologist at the Royal Brompton NHS Hospital, 'but cardiologists around the UK are reporting more young female patients showing risk factors associated with CHD. In the past 30 years, poor diet, excess alcohol, plus increased stress, have increased younger women's likelihood of getting heart-related illnesses.'

Am I at risk? A first-degree family history of heart problems (a grandparent, parent or sibling); high blood pressure; high cholesterol; diabetes; high stress levels; smoking and obesity can all put you at risk. **Symptoms to look for.** Women don't tend to suffer the chest, or left-arm pain, associated with heart attacks in men. In fact, sometimes heart disease is mistaken for indigestion, or anxiety, by GPs. Look, instead, for pain in the centre of the

chest near the tummy, which may feel like a gastric upset, shortness of breath or extreme tiredness. **What can I do if I'm worried?** Talk to your doctor about blood pressure, cholesterol and blood-sugar tests. Then, try entering your details into the Learn and Live Quiz at americanheart.org. Your family's health history can also be a good indicator. **Where can I find more information?** The British Heart Foundation at bhf.org.uk and hearttruth.org.