

Listen to Your Body

by Beth Davies

I followed all the directions.

Count your baby's kicks. If you don't get the required kick count, call your doctor. I did. Around 9 pm on an unseasonably warm Friday night in April, the doctor's directions were: *Go to the hospital.* Did that too. For hours, I lay in a hospital bed, my husband in a chair beside me, while my baby's and my vitals were monitored. Close to midnight, we received our next directive: *Go home and get some sleep. Tomorrow, eat a big breakfast and come back here in the morning.* For hours on Sunday morning, I was hooked up to the same monitors as the previous night. Nurses checked on me every now and then, but no one seemed overly concerned or reacted with any urgency. I asked why I couldn't feel the baby kick like it had and was told that I had a sleepy baby, or that maybe it had descended the birth canal. The doctor never saw me in person. Next direction was: *Go home and come back tomorrow (Monday) morning for an ultrasound.* At the ultrasound appointment, the technician moved the wand over my belly and then left the room to get the doctor. He stepped in and watched the screen as the tech moved the wand. He then turned to me and said, "There's no heartbeat."

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Thirty-five years have gone by since that day, but I still replay it in my head. I trusted the "experts." I trusted the technology of the monitoring system, the doctor I never saw, and the nurses who had seen hundreds of pregnancies before me. I didn't

know what was normal for a first-time pregnancy, so I trusted the hospital staff and machines more than I trusted myself. Never again, I vowed.

In my forties, I woke up feeling the sickest I've ever felt in my life. My breathing was shallow and labored. At my doctor's office, the nurse took my vitals. Then the doctor examined me and said I was having an asthma attack. She administered a nebulizer treatment, but my breathing didn't improve. I prodded a bit more by asking, *If it's just an asthma attack, why am I running a fever?* The doctor sent me for a chest X-ray. I was diagnosed with pneumonia in addition to my first (but not last) asthma attack. I was admitted to the hospital overnight to stabilize my breathing.

In my fifties, my period lasted longer than usual. I looked up the symptoms on the internet and saw that perimenopause was likely to blame, so I decided to wait a few more days before I called my doctor. While standing in line at a coffee shop with a friend one day, I experienced a sudden gush of blood between my legs. I immediately made an appointment to see my gynecologist and explained my symptoms. Being a bit older than me, she was sympathetic. *I still have my period too*, she said. I spoke up and told her it wasn't my age that bothered me, it was the length of time I had my period. She took a biopsy of my endometrial lining, and the pathology report indicated uterine cancer, stage 1A. I underwent a total hysterectomy and was declared cured several years later.

In my sixties, at my annual skin check, my dermatologist pointed to a spot on my leg. *It's a new spot*, I said. *I noticed it last week, and it's*



been itchy. She looked at it with her small lens and said it looked like a benign growth. I didn't let it go. I said, *I don't like that there's a bump under there. Feel it.* She felt it and asked if I wanted a biopsy. Yes, I said. She called me with the results a week later. The pathology found the benign growth she thought it was, along with squamous cell carcinoma. She scheduled an excision to remove more tissue, then closed the wound with ten stitches. That pathology report indicated all the cancer had been removed.

I didn't quite make it to my mid-sixties before the next health event occurred. During lunch with a friend, I tried to speak a couple of times, but the words didn't come out the way I intended them to. A few minutes later, I was able to talk perfectly again. Back to my normal self. However, the event was so unusual, and I was so unsettled by it, I called my doctor, and her directive was: *Head to the ER.* An MRI showed that I suffered a mini-stroke, a TIA

— transient ischemic attack. I underwent extensive testing and suffered no other side effects. If I had brushed away my symptoms and not gone to the ER, there was a very high probability of suffering a more debilitating stroke within the next few months.

Thirty-five years ago, I paid an unimaginable price to learn the lesson I did. I decided to be a partner with my doctor in my health care, rather than a participant on the sidelines. As I continue to age, I will have more health issues. I follow my own directions now. I know my body and know when something doesn't seem right. I open the notes app on my phone and jot down dates, times, and symptoms, so I have detailed information to give to my provider. I can then contribute to the analysis of my symptoms and push for further testing if I'm dissatisfied that something "might" be harmless.
