

National Wear **Red** Day: A Heart to Heart with Erica Douglas

Let's start by telling everyone your name and position here at Community Health Northwest Florida.

Erica Douglas, Clinical Office Manager for Airport Pediatrics and Airport Women's Care.

So, you told me the other day you are a heart patient. What type of heart condition(s) do you have, and were you born with this, or is it something you discovered later? Give us some history.

Cardiovascular conditions run in my family. My father died of a heart attack in 2010, my paternal grandfather suffered a stroke in 2009, and my maternal grandfather died of a heart attack in the early 70s.

I have two heart conditions myself: MVP (Mitral Valve Prolapse) and SVT (Supraventricular Tachycardia).

MVP is when the valve separating my left atrium and left ventricle does not close properly.

SVT (the one that causes me the most problems) is when the upper chamber of my heart's electrical system gets out of whack. There is a series of misfires that cause a very fast heart rate at a moment's notice, typically while I'm at rest. My HR has gotten up to about 180 bpm (normal HR is 80-100 bpm).

I was diagnosed with MVP in 2003 while in Nursing School at USA and SVT in 2009 while pregnant.

Since it's "National Wear Red Day", what's one message you'd like to convey specifically to *women* regarding heart health/heart disease?

Learn to not only listen to your body but take action. We tend to miss this important step. Sometimes, we become preoccupied with our family and friends' welfare and health, and neglect our own. Proper diet and exercise is vital. As we age, we may find that we cannot eat certain foods like we used to. It is important to know your limits.

**How have these diagnoses affected your life, your daily routine, your perspective?
Do you "seize the day" more or less than the average Joe?**

I may experience shortness of breath, chest pain, dizziness, and unexpected rapid heart rate. The SVT comes out of nowhere! I can be at the nail salon, driving, taking a nap, or just sitting at my desk and my heart will race like I've been running a Marathon. I will even start to sweat. The after effect is fatigue.

I have learned to pace myself and take small time outs if needed. At work, that may mean closing my office door for a moment to catch a "brain break". I have a wonderful support system at home and my husband and kids know how important it is to allow me to have my "mommy moment" if necessary.

Some of the foods that I love like chocolate, coffee, Coke, rice, breads, etc. have an adverse effect on either one of my heart conditions. I have to have them in moderation or find substitutes such as white chocolate over milk chocolate, or Sprite over Coke.

My outlook on life has drastically changed, especially with a few big cardiac episodes that I've had. I experienced a pretty severe one last year while at work. Thankfully, my pediatric team at the time sprang into action to make me as comfortable as possible until I was stable enough to head home.

I treat life like the precious gift that it is. I am learning to live by the "work model" *Tomorrow is not promised. Use your PTO today!* While this model is a little humorous, the message is important when it comes to setting aside time to do the things that make you and your loved ones happy.

You said the other day you might get emotional doing this interview.

What makes you emotional about living with a heart condition?

I have lost several loved ones to heart, and other, conditions. The emotional imprint that the loss leaves on you, coupled with your own health issues, is an up close reminder of how precious and meaningful life truly is. I believe it was William Shakespeare who said, "The meaning of life is to find your gift. The purpose of life is to give it away." I am not perfect, but I strive to be a better version of me each day and work towards my purpose. My hope is that before I leave this Earth, I will have used my purposed to help others.

What advice/words of wisdom would you give someone who has been diagnosed with a heart condition?

Listen to your healthcare provider AND listen to your body. Sickness (ailments, disease, etc.) does not have an age or face. It effects everyone; however, it does not have to define you or dictate your life.

Learn what your triggers are and learn how to avoid them. Understand that there will be good days and bad days. I anticipate and look forward to all my good days!

Is there anything else you've experienced that might help others?

- I had been experiencing chest pain and cardiac arrhythmias, such as sudden pounding of my heart and chest pain since the age of 16; however by MVP wouldn't be diagnosed until about 5yrs later while I was working on my BSN at USA in Mobile, AL.
- I presented in the ER with severe chest pain. I had been experiencing shortness of breath, fatigue, and chest pain for about 2 days... you know, all the things that being a full time nursing student, while working, could bring. This particular night, my chest pain had gotten worse than it had ever been. They heard a tick sound in my chest and later an EKG confirmed MVP.
- My SVT was diagnosed while I was 7 months pregnant with my last child (I have two boys). My heart rate increased to about 180 bpm and stayed that way for about an hour while at home waiting for the ambulance and until I finally made it to the hospital. They gave me a shot of Adenosine while in the ER that caused my heart to "reset" itself. It felt like an elephant was sitting on my chest. I remained on the cardiac floor for about 3 days, while hooked up to a fetal monitor that required 24hr bedside nursing supervision.

- When I go into an SVT episode, there are a few "go to" vagal exercises that I do on my own to try to come out of it. 1. Bear down really hard, as if to have a bowel movement, 2. Massage my carotid artery on side of my neck, 3. Splash cold water on my face, 4. Cough really hard and rapid, 5. Place ice pack on the back of my neck.
- I see my cardiologist at least once a year or if I notice any changes. After the SVT incident at work last year, I've had a Tilt Table Test and cardiac ultrasound. Over the years, I have had several diagnostic tests, labs, and educational sessions for my conditions. Although I experience an SVT episode at least once every other month (usually small, lasting about 2-3mins), I am no longer on any of my cardiac medications. I have considered having a radiofrequency ablation to "fix" my SVT. That is still a conversation to be had.
- Since I do not have regurgitation with my MVP, there is no need for intervention right now. I just have to monitor myself and report any changes to my cardiologist.

Final Thoughts?

My cardiac conditions have not stopped me from pursuing any of my life's goals or aspirations. I live a full and meaningful life, surrounded by positive people and positive energy. The moment I start to feel anxious, stressed, or irritable, I have to stop and say, "No, no Satan. Not today." My best is still yet to come! **(Amen!)**

A huge, HEARTfelt thank you to Erica Douglas for sharing the details, emotions and subsequent life lessons of this very personal journey. We hope it will inform and inspire others as it did this interviewer!