

On September 15, 2009, I nearly died. I might have died, had I not instructed an urgent care doctor what blood test to order for me. Understand.... **I** had to tell the **DOCTOR** what to do. Which is not in my nature, unfortunately. But at that moment something told me my life depended on me speaking up.

The night before, I'd been unable to sleep. When I tried to lay down, I'd get a burning pain through my chest that wrapped around my shoulder, down my back and around to my ribs. So I'd sit up. With each breath in, I'd get the same, but to a much lesser degree. So I tried to sleep sitting up. When my alarm went off at 6:00am on the 15th, I was exhausted. The pain continued, but was tolerable. I showered, got dressed, running through what might be happening in my body to cause this. I drove the hour into town and went to work.

Throughout the day, a heaviness in my chest descended. By the afternoon, I was having more difficulty breathing in. With each inhalation, a sharp stab would occur, just below and behind my left breast, causing me to catch... then release the shallow amount of air I'd tried to suck in. It wasn't excruciating... yet. So I kept working, and figured I'd go to the urgent care clinic after hours.

At 5:00pm, I did just that. I explained my symptoms. The doctor ordered x-rays. As I sat in a chair, my shoulders curling forward, getting less and less oxygen into my body, he walked in, stared straight into my eyes and said "Your x-rays are clear. Your lungs are fine". Pregnant pause. I was waiting for him to say "So, we'll order a...." or "But, I think it might be...". Something. But I got nothing. I said "So why can't I breathe? Why do I feel like I'm getting stabbed in the chest?" Nothing. Finally, he said "Well, we can try a brace of some sort, is that what you want?". I didn't know – why would I need that? Does he know something he's just not saying? I said "OK". The M.A. brought one in, helped stretch it around my trunk.

The doctor stared at me again.... I shrugged my shoulders. My voice now just a whisper, I said "Order a D-dimer". He looked at me, "What?" "Order a D-dimer". He scribbled out an order on an RX pad, handed it to me and said "Well, the hospital lab closes in ten minutes". Thank God I live in a small town, it took just 3 minutes to drive to the hospital.

It took just a few minutes to get the paperwork done and be escorted into the phlebotomy lab. A very nice, tired looking man drew my blood, and told me to drive home safely.

I got back in my car. Inhale slowly... stab in the chest... hold breath... exhale slowly. I ripped the stupid brace off. I ripped my bra off. The pressure was incredible. I started the car, and began driving home. Twenty minutes outside of town, my cell phone rang. I pulled over and answered with a barely audible "Hello?". The urgent care doctor said "Elizabeth, your D-dimer results are off the charts. You need to go back to the hospital right now and have a CT scan". There was apology in his voice, but certainly not in his words. Inhale, STAB, hold, exhale.

I went into the emergency room and approached the intake window. Inhale, STAB, hold, exhale. Whisper... "The doctor ordered a CT scan". Girl behind the glass: "You can't just come in and have a CT scan, it doesn't work that way". Inhale, STAB, HOLD, exhale. "Yes, he said he'd call". A young Hispanic man with baggy black scrubs on, looking for all the world like some kind of gang banger, but with kind eyes, shoves his head in front of hers and says "You the one with chest pain?" I nod my head. He disappears for a split second, comes out of a door next to the window and says "Come with me". He calmly asks if I need a wheel chair. The thought of spending a single moment more being stabbed in the chest while someone found a chair was incomprehensible... "No". Inhale, STAB, HOLD, exhale.

He led me back into the ER station. Said to a nurse, "Which bed is open, I got chest pain". That was my new name. Chest Pain. She pointed to an open bed. The young man disappeared. I now looked like I was having convulsions with every breath, the stabbing pain so severe and so deep. I wanted so badly not to breathe. It's not exactly something you can control – body needs oxygen – body will try to get oxygen. She told me to take off everything but my underwear and put on the hospital gown. opening in front. She closed the curtain and left. I stripped, and sat on the bed, cross-legged, tears streaming down my cheeks. I didn't dare sob. She came back, deftly started an IV and asked me to lay back. She started sticking EKG leads on my chest. I asked her if I could sit up, because the pain was unbearable when I lay down. She propped me up so it was a little better. Once she was done with the EKG she helped me sit back up.

A CT technician came and said “Ok, going for a ride, let’s get this CT done. I need you to lay back, please.” “I can’t, it hurts too bad”. “Hmmm. Can we try?” He slowly lowers the back of the gurney. Inhale, stab, hold, exhale. “OK? A little more?”. Inhale, stab, hold, exhale. But it’s tolerable. Morphine is goood. By the time we get to the CT lab, I realize I’m breathing a little better, getting a little more oxygen. He’s able to lay me flat for the scan. He delivers me back to my little curtain “room”.

The nurse comes back in and props me up again. “Feeling a little better”. “Yes, thank you”. Mmmmmorphine. Finally, just before midnight, the ER physician comes in, and sits down on the stool by my bed. “Elizabeth, you have a blood clot in your lung”. Morphine induced response... “No, no I don’t. It’s just pleurisy. Who’s in radiology tonight? Did Kostra read the image? Have her come in on this.” Hard stare. “So we’re going to admit you...”

They find me a bed in the step down unit. I’m very tired now, but I’m breathing, sort of. At least the knife seems to be out of my chest. Two nurses get me hooked up to all kinds of monitors, oxygen, IV... Placing the call button near my hand, they tell me to get some sleep. Right.

Early in the morning I’m wheeled down to the ultrasound lab. A very sweet ultrasound technician spends an hour trying find the primary clot in my legs- which is apparently where most pulmonary emboli are born. She’d squeeze my leg, causing the blood flow to be truncated, then she’d release quickly to see how well the flow would resume. She found no primary clot. My blood flow is excellent. I’m taken back to my room.

Another technician rolls in an echocardiogram cart. Once again, modesty is pushed to the side along with my gown as he places the leads on my chest. He says nearly nothing. He’s finished within ten minutes.

A hospitalist comes in and asks how I’m feeling. I tell him I feel surprisingly fine. He says the echo showed a very healthy, very strong heart. We chatted, as he tried to determine why I might have had this event, and how I came through it with no damage to my heart at all. I don’t smoke, I work out regularly, I eat pretty healthy. My weight is normal my height and age. The only risk factor I had, was that I had just begun taking Yaz birth control to regulate my cycles.

That's it. Yaz. I'm sure you've seen the commercials touting it's benefits... It helps calm the symptoms of PMDD (Pre Menstrual Dysmorphic Disorder). It can also help clear adult acne. Sounded great! Right? Except, I didn't do my homework. Neither did my gynecologist. I suffered from PMS – but not PMDD. I didn't even know what PMDD was until after the episode. I knew that birth control pills had a risk of blood clots. But, I didn't know that Yaz had a higher risk because of it's combination of estrogen and drospirinone.

So in the end, I'm fine. I have some decreased lung capacity, but I only notice it when I'm really exerting myself – breathing fast and heavy – I get a wheezing. It doesn't keep me from doing what I need to do. I am so very lucky. Others have had strokes. Others have had heart damage from a pulmonary embolism. Others have died.

I didn't do my homework, I didn't learn about the medication before I started taking it. I should have asked questions – I should have queried my doctor. But if it weren't for my medical background, I wouldn't have known to ask for the D-dimer blood test. And, if I hadn't, I'm not sure I'd be here. I would've gone home that night, and possibly died in my sleep. I don't know.

So, bottom line. ALWAYS – ALWAYS – ALWAYS ASK questions. RESEARCH your medications. Make INFORMED decisions. It's YOUR body, YOUR health, YOUR life.