



GAIL HARRIS-BERRY, AMBASSADOR AND YOU'RE THE CURE ADVOCATE AMERICAN HEART ASSOCIATION

Million Hearts in Action

[Strategies for Achieving Million Hearts Goals]



When Gail Harris-Berry was 43 years old, she made four trips to two different hospitals with chest pain. Each time, she was sent home with a clean bill of health. But the pain kept getting worse.

“The fifth time, I went to the hospital and refused to leave,” says Gail, now 51, of Maryland. Doctors decided to do a cardiac catheterization, in which they slid a catheter with a special camera on the end through an artery in her groin and up to her heart. They discovered an artery leading to her heart was 90% blocked. Two stents were quickly placed to open the artery and restore blood flow to her heart.

“Thank God you listened to your body and not to us because this would have killed you,” the surgeon told Gail. That’s when spreading the word about heart disease became her mission.

[Fast Facts]

- Heart disease survivor since 2006
- Dedicated advocate raising heart disease awareness locally and nationally

[What She Did]

- Get involved. Soon after being diagnosed with heart disease, Gail became an American Heart Association ambassador and joined You’re the Cure, a nationwide grassroots network of people who advocate for heart-healthy and stroke-smart communities through legislative policies in cities, states and nationwide.
- Share her story and champion heart-health efforts. “Because of my experience, I know firsthand that heart disease needs a louder voice,” says Gail. Since 2006, she has helped raise awareness about heart disease and its symptoms at various events in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area and through local and national media. Here are a few examples:
 - In 2014, Gail spoke at “Paint the Mall Red,” a local event to raise awareness about heart disease in women and how women can lower their risk.
 - Gail accepted on behalf of the American Heart Association a resolution passed by the D.C. City Council in February 2013 proclaiming February as Heart Month in D.C.



- In June 2012, Gail joined more than 40 You're the Cure advocates to urge members of Congress to protect funding for the National Institutes of Health from budget cuts.
- Gail was among 70 American Heart Association volunteers to participate in the 2012 White House Community Leaders Briefing on Cardiovascular Health, where she shared her story with Obama administration officials.
- ABC News with Diane Sawyer profiled Gail in a story that aired in 2012 about heart attack symptoms in women often being misunderstood.
- Beat the odds. Several years ago, Gail was in a coma, and doctors did not expect her to live. Perforation of her lower intestine during a cardiac catheterization had caused severe internal bleeding. She had three surgeries and seven blood transfusions. After two weeks in a coma, Gail began the long rehabilitation process. "Other than my 'battle' scars, most people don't believe what I went through when they look at me," she says. "But they all acknowledge I am a living miracle."

[What She Accomplished]

Gail has been an avid heart ambassador in the D.C. metro area for eight years and continues to spread the word about heart disease to the general public, with a special emphasis on women.

"What I've endured — and that I'm alive to tell the story — has really been an eye-opener to many people," says Gail, who influenced her mother and younger sister, also a heart disease survivor, to become American Heart Association ambassadors.

“Heart disease is the nation’s No. 1 killer. That’s why I lend my voice to every opportunity I can to help reduce the number of heart disease-related deaths — including my own!”

*- Gail Harris-Berry,
heart disease survivor*



[What She Learned]

- Family history is an important risk factor. Gail didn't have high blood pressure or high cholesterol. What she had was a strong family history of heart disease.
- Heart attack and stroke prevention matters. Gail takes steps every day to reduce her risk for a heart attack or stroke. Preventive medications are part of her daily routine, as is healthy eating and exercise. "We can't change our heritage, but we can change our health behavior," she says. "Heart disease is the nation's No. 1 killer. That's why I lend my voice to every opportunity I can to help reduce the number of heart disease-related deaths—including my own!"

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