

About Health TV with Jeanne Blake
Surviving a Heart Attack
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JEANNE BLAKE: Welcome to About Health. I'm Jeanne Blake. Coronary heart disease is the leading killer of men and women in the United States. About 40 percent of people who have a coronary attack will die from it. On this edition of About Health, we're joined by a man who survived a heart attack, and his story may help save your life or the life of someone that you love. We welcome Don Quinlan, who was first here talking about his heart attack nine years ago.

DON QUINLAN: Actually, 10 years ago, sorry to interrupt.

JEANNE BLAKE: No, your heart attack was 10 years ago, you were talking – don't ever correct the host!

DON QUINLAN: Sorry about that, Jeanne.

JEANNE BLAKE: You look fabulous. How are you feeling?

DON QUINLAN: Very good, actually. I've had a little bit of a problem. Back in January, my cardiologist suggested I should have a treadmill test periodically, every two or three years. And I said, Sure, fine. So I've had my stress test, and I flunked. I had a problem, it was about the fourth or fifth minute of the test, and they really thought I had a problem. They were very –

JEANNE BLAKE: Were you surprised by this, by the way?

DON QUINLAN: Yeah, I was.

JEANNE BLAKE: You were feeling great.

DON QUINLAN: Feeling good, not great, but feeling good. I just, I guess my heart rate went crazy, so they stopped the test. So then my cardiologist called me the next day and said, We're going to have to do an angiogram to see what is wrong in your system. So I went in the next week, I believe, or three or four days later. I was there – you're awake during the whole procedure – and he said, Don, you have a blockage, so I'm going to put a stent.

JEANNE BLAKE: And a stent is a wire mesh, for those who don't know, that actually stays in.

DON QUINLAN: Right, exactly. And a little bit further on he said, Oh, I see another blockage. Another stent. So I'm saying to myself, They must be on sale this week. Had to make light of a serious situation.

JEANNE BLAKE: You hope they're on sale.

DON QUINLAN: Exactly. So he finished up, and since that time I went to Florida, I've been in Florida for a couple of months, and I feel great. So obviously stents work. I had one put in 10 years ago, I had one put in five months ago, and they're a lifesaver. Instead of opening up the chest, which, who knows if that ever happens, I hope not, but the stents seem to work. Someone asked me the other day, Do they last forever? Who knows? I hope so.

JEANNE BLAKE: In some people, and in some others they don't.

DON QUINLAN: Exactly. So I'm hoping that the ones they gave me –

JEANNE BLAKE: I hope even though they were on sale you got the top of the line brand. Don, take us back to that frightening day 10 years ago when you had your heart attack. I'm sure you remember it very clearly.

DON QUINLAN: It's like it happened yesterday, because you don't forget those things. I had a lunch in Boston, I think I told you that. It was a lousy lunch, just felt terrible. But then I came home, and when I came home there was nobody home. My wife had gone to Cape Cod, where we have a place, for a couple of days, and she wasn't home. My younger son, who was living with me, he was out with his friends. It was like 4:00 in the afternoon, 4:30. I didn't feel all that great, but I wasn't really in bad shape. So I turned the television on, and then I had the feeling up here –

JEANNE BLAKE: That tightness in the chest.

DON QUINLAN: Yeah, the tightness, and I figured, huh, you know, it's the lunch coming back to me, must be indigestion. So I got up and I walked around, and then I sat down, I laid down, and it wasn't going away. So I got a little sweaty, and I said, Well, maybe I'll take a shower. Which, looking back, is kind of ridiculous, but I thought it would make me feel better. And I came out of the shower and I looked in the mirror and I'm white as a sheet. And I'm still perspiring, so I towel off and I get dressed, and I'm saying to myself, I've got to go to the hospital. I didn't really want to go, but I said I would. So I went outside and got in my car –

JEANNE BLAKE: Let me just stop you. This is such a critical moment, because most people don't get in the car.

DON QUINLAN: I know that.

JEANNE BLAKE: What do you think made you get in the car? And then we'll continue with the story.

DON QUINLAN: All right. It wasn't going away. The pressure was there, and it wasn't going away. Usually indigestion, a good belch and it goes away. This didn't. Nothing happened, it just was a heavy pressure, started to go into my arms –

JEANNE BLAKE: Were you thinking heart attack?

DON QUINLAN: I really wasn't, because I didn't want to even think about that. Know what I mean?

JEANNE BLAKE: So you were in denial but you weren't in denial, because you were on the way to the hospital.

DON QUINLAN: Exactly.

JEANNE BLAKE: OK, continue your story.

DON QUINLAN: So I drove to the hospital, which is like two miles away from my house, and I called my wife on the car phone, and I was kind of funny on the phone – not funny, she didn't think it was funny. I said, Pat, I don't feel good, I'm going to the hospital, I think I'm having a heart attack. That's when I said it, because then I realized that I can't fool around anymore, this is serious stuff. And she said, You're what? and she's screaming. I said, Pat, please come home. I'm on my way to the hospital. "I'm busy." I'm driving. I clicked, I didn't want to talk anymore. So I drove the two miles, which was stupid. I could have had an accident, I could have killed other people and myself. So I get to the

hospital, in the emergency parking area, and I just sat in the car for another minute and a half or so, I don't know how long. But it didn't seem like that long, because I realized then – I'm in denial, obviously – once I get in that emergency room, my life changes. So finally I got into the front door, and the triage nurse was waiting on a young couple –

JEANNE BLAKE: Had you called ahead?

DON QUINLAN: No. She looked at me and she said, Do you feel all right there? And I said, Well, I have some chest pain. And that's when the alarm goes off in any kind of emergency room. The wheelchair was there, they ushered me in. They gave me some medicine, TPA, and the pressure was still there, it wasn't going away. So they made a decision to transport me into Boston to another hospital, because that particular hospital didn't have open heart surgery at the time. So I went in there, and that's when they did the angiogram there and did the angioplasty and put in the stent, and when they put the stent in, it was like magic.

JEANNE BLAKE: And all this happened –

DON QUINLAN: Probably the total time from the time I really felt the pressure till the stent went in, I would say probably an hour and a half.

JEANNE BLAKE: That's amazing.

DON QUINLAN: It is, looking back. But there's no question I would have died, because there was a severe blockage there. The heart was probably damaged.

JEANNE BLAKE: I was going to ask – that was my next question, and I don't remember from our previous interview how much damage you had to your heart.

DON QUINLAN: Well, I don't know exactly, because I'm not a medical person, but I would say probably, a low percentage. It's in the right ventricle area, and they said it was like 5 to 10, maybe less, maybe more. But there was definitely a slowdown, and I notice it when I'm walking, when I'm doing anything, I get tired more so than I did 10 years ago.

JEANNE BLAKE: So how long were you in the hospital?

DON QUINLAN: I think that time six days.

JEANNE BLAKE: And how did life change for you after that?

DON QUINLAN: Well, right off the bat I was on a strict diet and on the medicine, obviously, which I'm still on, which I'd love to quit some day. They tell you to eat right, that's the main thing. I never did, and I still don't do as well as I should.

JEANNE BLAKE: What does that mean to you? What were you doing that you quit doing?

DON QUINLAN: Well, I'm Irish, I grew up in an Irish household, where it leaked potatoes. You just ate that kind of food: bread, toast, bacon, eggs, and those are the things I'd always gone to, that I liked. To get away from that, it takes a little bit of doing, a little bit – it's mind over matter. So I try to eat more salads nowadays. I stay away from sugar. I stay away from salt, unless it's in the product itself. That's been ongoing for a long time now. And I just try to – I've got to eat less, which is a problem, because I still have a gut, which I'm working on, but –

JEANNE BLAKE: I think the American Heart Association would be very happy with what you just described, because they issued new guidelines recently, and those are among them, all of the those things that you mentioned are among them. And we'll talk about those a little bit later.

DON QUINLAN: I did quit smoking many, many years ago – 1981 was when I quit, and I'm thinking that that might have had something to do with it. I know stress had a lot to do with it.

JEANNE BLAKE: Sure, you worked hard.

DON QUINLAN: I worked hard, but I had – we were just in the middle of buying a home on Cape Cod, another home on Cape Cod, in fact that was a lot of money. I look back now, it was cheap, but that's then. And I have a handicapped son, he's 41 now, he's profoundly deaf, and that's been on my mind for 41 years. When I leave, when my wife leaves, and he's all alone, he's got his two siblings – that's another story. But that's part of the stress that developed over the years.

JEANNE BLAKE: So post heart attack, how have you dealt – you explained how you try to eat differently. How are you dealing differently with your stress?

DON QUINLAN: I don't have any. I try not to. I'm living on Cape Cod. I don't have a job, I'm retired. We're on fixed income, so we're not extravagant but we go to Florida every year, we go for three months. I try not to get too involved with stuff.

JEANNE BLAKE: So what the heart attack did was sort of hold up a mirror to life and tell you what's important.

DON QUINLAN: I never thought about even thinking about having a heart attack when I was younger. I just figured that I was good. I think I told you this before, I was in good in health.

JEANNE BLAKE: And you were how old, by the way, when you had your heart attack?

DON QUINLAN: Sixty. I am now 70.

JEANNE BLAKE: That's young. Wow. You don't look like you're 70. But that's young to have a heart attack – well, in the spectrum of people who have heart attacks.

DON QUINLAN: But yet my father – I think I told you that – he was 47, 48 and he had a massive heart – this was the 1940s, I don't know what massive meant in those days, but it was a pretty good heart attack. And he continued to smoke, because in those days they did not know that those things were bad for you. And he lived to be 70, which is my age right now.

JEANNE BLAKE: Not everyone that has a heart attack is able to then retire, so exercise, of course, is an important way to deal with stress, aside from changing your priorities and looking at life differently, which you've done, therefore you find things are less worrisome, right?

DON QUINLAN: Basically, yes. And that's what it's all about, I think. The average person – I look back and now I'm like a guru, I can tell people, Don't work too hard. Don't worry. But you have to. If you're running a business, or if you're just going to work every day, you're worried about something, and that can do a lot of damage to your circulatory system. That's my feeling, anyway. And of course people eat the wrong foods, they eat on the run, and they don't eat properly, and they have all kinds of family issues, etc., etc.

JEANNE BLAKE: We've just sped up. In the last 10 years, in the last 9 years since you were here, I think we're going three times as fast as we did then.

DON QUINLAN: No question. I noticed that coming up on the expressway today from Cape Cod. People drive like they're on speed, basically. They look at you, Why are you going so slow? I'm only going 65.

JEANNE BLAKE: Don, what about exercise?

DON QUINLAN: Do you have to ask that question?

JEANNE BLAKE: Sure! I think I know the answer.

DON QUINLAN: I do have a stationary bike on my porch, which I get on occasionally, not as often as I would like to. I do walk three or four times a week.

JEANNE BLAKE: How far?

DON QUINLAN: Maybe 30 minutes each time. Sometimes I stretch it to an hour.

JEANNE BLAKE: That's what the American Heart Association says, I think, to exercise 30 minutes a day.

DON QUINLAN: That's what my doctor said. At least five days a week, but I'm up to three, sometimes four. So I'm getting there. Walking is fun, if it's a nice area, and I have a nice little area

where I am. The only problem is no sidewalks, so you've got to kind of look out for the cars, but walk against the traffic, which I tell people and they still don't know that.

JEANNE BLAKE: I was going to ask, you said that you tell people now – do you find yourself talking to people about your experience and trying to –

DON QUINLAN: Oh, all the time.

JEANNE BLAKE: Oh, you do.

DON QUINLAN: And when I have guests over, I show the video.

JEANNE BLAKE: The video of the interview we first did?

DON QUINLAN: Yes. That's my proof.

JEANNE BLAKE: So you've become somewhat, on your own, sort of a spokesperson to help people live in a healthier way.

DON QUINLAN: I try to instill in them some sort of way to balance your life. You can't be going full speed ahead all the time, it's going to catch up with you. And these people, in their 30s and 40s – I'm healthy, I'm immortal, nothing's going to happen to me. And that's probably the same feeling I had in those years.

JEANNE BLAKE: Let me ask you, I know when I talk with people who live with cancer, that it's something that never goes away. Do you find yourself thinking about the fact that you are a survivor of a heart attack?

DON QUINLAN: Yes, as a matter of fact I do. Not as often as you might think, but back in January, when he told me that I flunked the stress test, yeah. That's when I thought that –

JEANNE BLAKE: But I mean on a – because that was serious, but I'm just talking about as you go through your day, do you find that it sometimes comes up and that you live with a degree of fear that it will happen again.

DON QUINLAN: I really don't. I try to put it out of my mind, because I think I'd be a basket case otherwise, if I thought that if I took one extra step I'd fall down. So I try to look at life on the positive side. I've been here 70 years, I figure I'm going to be here another 10, 20? The next interview we have will be in 10 years, right here.

JEANNE BLAKE: Right, our 20th anniversary.

DON QUINLAN: That'd be nice.

JEANNE BLAKE: I want to go over some of these guidelines from the American Heart Association. Recently they upgraded, or they changed their recommendations. I want to name the four main warning signs of a heart attack and put them on the screen. I think you can't reinforce these signs enough. And I'd just ask you to – because I think you experienced each one of these – just comment as I mention them. Chest discomfort. Definitely you had that.

DON QUINLAN: Absolutely. Pressure up in this area.

JEANNE BLAKE: People often describe it as “There’s an elephant sitting on my chest.”

DON QUINLAN: Yeah, it was, it was very uncomfortable.

JEANNE BLAKE: OK, discomfort in other areas of the upper body.

DON QUINLAN: Not at first, afterwards. Maybe 15, 20 minutes, maybe even half an hour after the initial feeling, it started to go down my arms and then I realized.

JEANNE BLAKE: And I think you described it being in your shoulders too.

DON QUINLAN: Yes, shoulders too.

JEANNE BLAKE: I think that’s what really motivated you to get in the car. Shortness of breath.

DON QUINLAN: I didn’t notice that as much, but I was sweating, and I honestly didn’t notice shortness of breath.

JEANNE BLAKE: The next one is cold sweat. Did you have nausea or lightheadedness?

DON QUINLAN: No nausea, no lightheadedness. I wouldn’t have driven, I don’t think, if I felt that way. But I did have sweats. That’s why I took the shower, which felt good but didn’t really help.

JEANNE BLAKE: Didn’t cure your heart attack.

DON QUINLAN: You're supposed to take an aspirin, but there wasn't any aspirin in the house, I couldn't find any, so I took Tylenol. Probably not the same, but –

JEANNE BLAKE: I think that probably would be another recommendation, is to keep aspirin in your medicine cabinet. But the American Heart Association says that if you feel these symptoms to call 911, not necessarily get in the car.

DON QUINLAN: Right. I did fine. I would do it again. Another thing about driving yourself to the hospital – if, in fact, they don't see you when you walk in and you have to sit down, it may be half an hour, an hour, an hour and a half. Come by ambulance, you're in. Through the back door and you're right there.

JEANNE BLAKE: You can also, as you presented saying, I'm having chest pains, and then, as you said, your world changed. They hopped to it.

DON QUINLAN: And in the ambulance the EMTs can take care of things right off the bat.

JEANNE BLAKE: Well, that's right. You would have lost that time driving to the hospital.

DON QUINLAN: I was very lucky.

JEANNE BLAKE: Very lucky. I would like now to just go over some of the guidelines that the American Heart Association issues, and these really are very commonsense. You mentioned some of them. You mentioned that you're trying to keep your weight down. They say use up at least as many calories as you take in, and it's just really about putting less stress on your heart. The next one is eat less of the nutrient poor foods. How are you doing on that?

DON QUINLAN: The nutrient poor foods?

JEANNE BLAKE: Are you going to pretend you don't know what they are?

DON QUINLAN: What are they? It's all the foods I like. Yeah, I try to cut down. Last night we had a guest, my niece came to visit, and we had a nice lasagna that my wife made, with spinach, cream cheese, and I made a nice salad, and that was our meal. That's not the healthiest thing in the world, but to me it was healthy, as opposed to roast beef with baked potato and sour cream.

JEANNE BLAKE: Exactly. And then vegetables and fruits. And I read one that surprised me a little bit. It says eat dark vegetables, which of course I know what that means, it means spinach, broccoli. But then it said peaches. I don't necessarily think of peaches as dark fruit. But also berries.

DON QUINLAN: Do you know how difficult it is to find a good peach in the supermarket? Oh, they look great, you get them home, they're like a rock. Then they turn to mush.

JEANNE BLAKE: You have to put them in a brown paper bag.

DON QUINLAN: That's what we tried.

JEANNE BLAKE: OK. And then eating unrefined whole grain foods, which contain fiber and will help lower blood cholesterol and help you feel full, which will help you manage your weight. How are you doing on the whole grains?

DON QUINLAN: I don't eat white bread, I eat seven grain or whole wheat, that kind of bread, which – I don't eat butter anymore, I use the fake butter.

JEANNE BLAKE: And then I noticed that when I printed this out on my computer, I actually copies this twice, it says, Don't smoke tobacco and stay away from tobacco smoke. And then the next line is Don't smoke tobacco and stay away from tobacco smoke.

DON QUINLAN: Gee, you want to emphasize that.

JEANNE BLAKE: I really mean that.

DON QUINLAN: And I do.

JEANNE BLAKE: And you do. When you're around people who are smoking, does the smoke bother you? Do you –

DON QUINLAN: At first it does, if it's in a closed area, like in this room, let's say, if you were smoking or if someone were smoking I would feel it. After a while it kinda gets to you. But there are not that many people smoking anymore. No matter where you go, there's nobody smoking, which is great. Tough on them, but they have to go outside and smoke –

JEANNE BLAKE: This many years later, do you miss smoking?

DON QUINLAN: No, I don't. I don't at all. When I quit, it took me probably three, four, five weeks to really wean myself off. [??] but after that, no. I used to associate a cup of coffee in the morning with a cigarette. That's the way I drove to Boston, with a cigarette – I don't know what hands I was using, but that's the way it was.

JEANNE BLAKE: That was all part of your living in the fast lane.

DON QUINLAN: Yeah. And then I stopped drinking coffee for a while, because it didn't taste the same without that association. Then afterwards I didn't desire it. So it was just the three, four, five weeks or whatever.

JEANNE BLAKE: And that's it.

DON QUINLAN: That's it. I was very lucky. When I had quit a few times before that – I'm gonna quit tomorrow, that kind of thing. And then this one day I woke up, and it was a Sunday, we had been out the night before, I had too much to drink, too many smokes, and I said to Pat, I don't think I'm going to smoke today. I think I'm going to quit. And then it got to be 5:00 and I'm watching "60 Minutes" that night, I hadn't had a cigarette, and I'm going to bed.

JEANNE BLAKE: So you wanted to quit.

DON QUINLAN: Yes. Well, it came to that. And the next day, started off, I'm not going to have a cigarette. And it was day to day to – that's the whole thing, it is a day-to-day thing.

JEANNE BLAKE: Of course it is.

DON QUINLAN: Because it is a very difficult habit. I just lost a good, dear cousin of mine, lived in Virginia. Very intelligent man, he was in the Navy, he graduated from Annapolis and MIT, and he had such a habit. And he tried to quit so many times. It's worse than drugs, I mean hard drugs.

JEANNE BLAKE: My father had a stroke, but before that, I believe, I can't remember because it was many years ago, he quit smoking. And then he developed cancer of the larynx. He told me very

shortly before he died, and then he developed lung cancer, that he still craved cigarettes. He quit smoking but the craving was still there. And I just can't imagine what that would be like to live with that.

DON QUINLAN: My wife, Pat, was a smoker too. She quit after I did, and she had a worse, more serious habit than I did. And occasionally she'll say, I'd like a cigarette. And this is like – she quit the year of my heart attack, so it's been 10 years. She hasn't smoked, but every now and again – I never do. When I see people smoking – it's so stupid. When you think about it, it is stupid.

JEANNE BLAKE: Don, we wish you continued good health because we expect you back here in another nine years.

DON QUINLAN: Well, I certainly hope so.

JEANNE BLAKE: So you're going to exercise more, right? You're going to keep eating well and continue to not smoke, and keep seeing the doctor.

DON QUINLAN: And keeping a handle on stress.

JEANNE BLAKE: Thank you for mentioning that, because maybe I'll remember that.

DON QUINLAN: Well, stress is a big part of our lives, every day. Every week, every month. People are just hell-bent on doing all the things they want to do.

JEANNE BLAKE: It affects us in a lot of ways.

DON QUINLAN: And it comes out when – what happened to me, all of a sudden – it didn't happen that day in April of 1996, it was building up.

JEANNE BLAKE: OK, well thanks for all of the reminders so that we can all be heart healthy. We appreciate your coming in.

DON QUINLAN: Thank for having me.

JEANNE BLAKE: We'd like to thank you for joining us on this edition of About Health. I'm Jeanne Blake, and I'll see you next time.

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