

# How a heart problem has changed a young mum's life

- by [Madeleine Brindley](#), Western Mail
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Kristina Jackson

**Charities are this week urging GPs to carry out routine pulse checks to detect underlying heart problems. Kristina Jackson explains how her health and life has been transformed by a heart rhythm disorder**

KRISTINA Jackson went from being a fairly active and fit young mother to someone who was barely able to climb the stairs or walk the length of her garden almost overnight.

She developed the heart rhythm disorder POTS – postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome – while she was pregnant with her youngest child.

Her shortness of breath and inability to walk any distance was initially put down to “pregnancy hormones” but following the birth of her son, she became more and more exercise intolerant.

“By the time I moved from Scotland to Wales, 18 months after the initial onset, I started collapsing – infrequently at first,” said Kristina, 36, who lives in Aberporth.

“I went to the GP with chest pain on exertion and exercise intolerance. I saw a cardiologist privately who came up with nothing more than a slightly leaky valve and really didn’t take me seriously at all, suggesting I might be unfit.

“A few months later I collapsed in the post office in the village and was taken to hospital in an ambulance. After a couple of trips of this nature they got fed up with me and decided to refer me to the cardiologist who had an interest in heart rhythm disorders.”

The cardiologist recommended Kristina undergo a stress ECG – she lasted just two and a half minutes before almost collapsing. Fortunately the cardiologist had attended a lecture about POTS and was able to diagnose the condition; a further test confirmed the diagnosis.

POTS is a relatively new disorder – patients were previously told they had chronic fatigue syndrome or an anxiety or panic disorder. Some were even told it was all in their heads.

The syndrome is defined as an increase in heart rate of more than 30 beats per minute when standing upright but without a fall in blood pressure; this is often made worse by even modest physical exertion.

Kristina, who has two children, said: “My path to where I am now has been by no means smooth. The tilt table test I undertook did not take constant blood pressure monitoring and there was the constant battle of trying to convince the medics my blood pressure was not dropping, but increasing.

“Over the last few years I have fought this battle. Eventually I got a second tilt table test with constant blood pressure monitoring. Within 25 seconds of becoming heads up my heart rate shot up from 80 to 158 and my blood pressure went through the roof. They finally decided my POTS is not blood pressure-related but heart rhythm-related.

“Living with POTS and its seeming deterioration has proved tough. In the space of five years, I’ve gone from collapsing occasionally to collapsing virtually every day, sometimes a couple of times a day.

“I can no longer do a lot of things I used to be able to do – I can’t run and play with the kids; I can’t shower and even bathing is tricky as getting out shoots my heart rate through the roof.

“I have to use a wheelchair whenever I leave the house as I have no quality of life without one. I even manage to collapse coming up from the garden. I have had to give up so much.

“But saying that, I’ve managed to stay positive and move on to new things – I now knit, spin and sew. I paint and draw.

“The biggest plus for me is having the chance to fulfil my life-long ambition and write. I have self-published a collection of short stories, a lot of which are about dealing with adversity and making the most of it, just like I’ve done. I’ve got another collection of short stories being released soon and I’m hoping I’ll finish my novel and have that released in October.

“We’ve bought a mobility scooter so I can go for walks with my family. I am now in the process of saving up for an electric wheelchair and a mechanism for getting it in and out of the car. Once I have this my new life will be complete.

“All I’ll have to deal with then is the stigma of using one.”

**More information about POTS is available from the charity [STARS](#) – which was set up to ensure people suffering unexplained loss of consciousness receive the correct diagnosis**

**Next page: Regular pulse checks can save lives**

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### **Regular pulse checks can save lives**

At the start of heart rhythm week today (June 6), the Arrhythmia Alliance is encouraging everyone to know their pulse.

The alliance, a coalition of patients, carers and health professionals, is also campaigning for GPs to carry out pulse checks.

Trudie Lobban, founder of Arrhythmia Alliance said, “Pulse checks are a cost-free way to save thousands from death, disability and poor health arising from heart rhythm disorders. If routine pulse checks were introduced into GP care, many more people could be picked up. Preventative action can save lives – people with atrial fibrillation are five times more at risk of stroke but well-managed AF can save the NHS millions of pounds.”

The Arrhythmia Alliance being “pulse aware” can help detect potential arrhythmias – irregular heart rhythms – early.

This in turn can ensure people get the right treatment, which can reduce NHS costs and the number of strokes caused by cardiac arrhythmias.

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