

Claire's story



Within the space of a few hours, Claire had been diagnosed with AF, and told she'd suffered a stroke. Here she shares her story.

I shouldn't think my story is a typical one and hopefully it won't be a frightening one, but it is my tale of AF and hopefully it will help others who may be going through a similar situation.

I am a nurse and researcher in my forties and I moved with my husband to a lovely Midland village last summer, after formally being a city-girl all my life. We have a nice life and try to look after ourselves as much as possible, taking advantage of the 'good things' when we can. The last few years have thrown up some major life events and I know I have sometimes been sad, anxious, stressed and over-busy but I felt I was very healthy and capable; just in need of a few good nights' sleep!

One evening last October, while scraping wallpaper off the bedroom wall prior to a planned weekend of decorating, I suddenly felt very unwell. The room started spinning violently; I felt unsteady and sick, and rapidly developed a one-sided headache. The only way I could get any relief was to lie down on the floor and close my eyes. After a short time, and with no resolution, I reluctantly called my husband. Eventually, and even more reluctantly, I allowed him to call an ambulance.

An ECG showed I was in AF, but I'd had no obvious symptoms of this, either at the time or before – no shortness of breath, no palpitations, no chest pain, no dizziness... The paramedic gave me diamorphine, called his colleagues and they took me to a general hospital. After being given IV beta blockers there, my AF resolved and I slowly began to feel a bit better albeit with a

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headache, a lot of unsteadiness and the wish to sleep for a week.

My consultant came to see me the next morning and was happy to let me go home after having a head CT "just as a precaution". He seemed as surprised as I was when he came to see me afterwards to let me know I'd had a stroke. Two serious diagnoses within a few hours!

The days that followed are a bit of a blur. I developed further symptoms and was sent to a specialist unit at the John Radcliffe Hospital in Oxford. However, things fortunately settled down and I was sent home after a week.

I have been extremely lucky. Although I've been left with some physical symptoms they do not debilitate me. I went back to work within a couple of months, I look the same, speak the same and can now do all the things I used to be able to do, even if sometimes a bit more slowly. I have a fantastic husband who did – and continues to help out so much physically and emotionally, often to the detriment of himself. His daughter and her partner, who live locally, have been absolute rocks for both of us. I have two great brothers who live miles away but dropped everything to be with me at the time, and they along with their wives and children, have continued to support and encourage me. Other family members, friends, colleagues, neighbours and healthcare staff have been marvellous and I've felt very loved and supported. I'm now on statins, anti-hypertensives and anticoagulants, so hopefully any more episodes of AF will be better controlled, whether I am aware of them or not.

I suppose the biggest change is that things have become quieter and I no longer rush around like I used to. This is partly physical (caused by fatigue and drug/stroke side effects) but also psychological. I have had a stark reminder that life is finite and so it has become even more precious

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to enjoy a walk, a meal with my husband, a chat to a niece or an evening with friends. Although life still throws curved balls, I am now aware that I have AF and try and react more cautiously and be gentle on myself. Getting home while the sun's still up is more important to me than being the last in the office and visiting the places I want to go to in the UK is more important than seeing the world. I hope to be able to jump into my car without thinking again (mainly to see my friends and family who live far and wide), a promotion before retirement would be nice and I hope that insurance companies won't stop me planning a future dream holiday! But, in the meantime, I'm looking forward to getting better and enjoying a peaceful, sunny summer here in this lovely part of the world.

Claire Balmer, Warwickshire (2014)