

Teresa Pendleton's Story

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Teresa and Todd Pendleton just were getting used to the rhythm of having a new baby at home in late November when everything shifted. As a result, their family, including their four young children, will celebrate Christmas today at Bon Secours St. Mary's Hospital, an example of the "new normal" of their lives, Todd Pendleton said. Teresa Pendleton, 34, is recovering from a series of surgeries after she suffered a massive heart attack two weeks after she gave birth in mid-November to Allison, the newest addition to their family. Pendleton's coronary arteries dissected or tore and caused her to have a heart attack Nov. 28. During bypass surgery to repair the arteries, her heart failed.



Doctors took her off the heart-lung bypass machine used during surgery and put her on a machine called a left ventricular-assist device (LVAD) that does the pumping work of the left side of the heart. On Dec. 10, that external device was replaced by an implanted, portable version of the left ventricular-assist device. She hopes to go home next week with the implanted device. The device she has, HeartMate II, can serve either as a temporary fix until a patient gets a heart transplant or as a longer-term therapy to keep a patient alive.

Teresa Pendleton recalled the episode Nov. 28 that started everything. It was in the middle of the night, and she had stabbing chest pain. It felt, she said, as if someone had taken a knife and went in the front of her chest and out the back. She was short of breath. "We had to pack up the four kids," she said. In addition to newborn Allison, they are parents of Katelyn, 11, Austin, 9, and Carson, 4.

After the bypass surgery, "Her heart basically was not beating," said Dr. Marc R. Katz, a cardiac surgeon and chief medical officer of the Bon Secours Heart & Vascular Institute. The initial condition that brought her to the hospital is something called spontaneous coronary artery dissection, Katz said. It is a rare medical event that happens mostly to women and more often to women who recently have given birth, he said. Many cases are fatal and are diagnosed only during autopsies or evaluations after death, according to medical literature.

Teresa Pendleton said she carried a lot of fluid during her last pregnancy but otherwise didn't notice any differences from her three previous births. Next for her is getting comfortable with the device that is keeping her alive. The ventricular-assist device uses batteries, so patients can move around. In a small percentage of cases, patients' hearts, allowed to rest, regain function.

Family and friends have rallied around the Pendletons, who are especially thankful for their church family at Clover Hill Assembly of God. Their children are holding up well, the couple said, with 4-year-old Carson saying "Cool, mom's on batteries," Teresa Pendleton said with a laugh. "The people here saved our lives," Todd Pendleton said. "Not just hers. Ours."