

Spontaneous Coronary Artery Dissection is the most common form of heart attack in pregnancy*

Rachel's story



Rachel's SCAD and cardiac arrest led to brain damage, but she is determined, one day, to be able to look after her daughter.

The following has been told to me by my loved ones who sat by my bed every day from when I was taken ill on 18 October 2013 until my final return home on 18 March 2014. I have no memory of the day I became ill or the weeks before, but I am hoping with time I can remember some of the vital pieces of information, especially the birth of my daughter Romilly Violet three weeks to the day before collapsing.

I had had a troubled pregnancy, being diagnosed with gestational diabetes, hypertension and threatened pre-eclampsia, and I know everyone was relieved when I eventually gave birth. On the morning of 18 October I took a shower whilst my husband, Andy, watched Romilly. I then felt sharp pains across my chest and down my left arm and Andy was alarmed enough to call an ambulance, especially with my history of high blood pressure. I managed to get dressed as I assumed they may need to take me in to hospital.

The ambulance crew arrived and, sure enough, said my blood pressure was high and they would be taking me in for observation. I then tried to get myself off the bed and collapsed immediately. I was having a heart attack and went into cardiac arrest. My heart did not beat on its own for over 80 minutes.

My family were told I would not survive

I remained in a coma for three and a half weeks. During much of that time my family were told I would not survive, or I would be paralysed or, worse, left in a vegetative state.

I remained in hospital for 22 weeks and most of that time I was sleeping, being fed by a tube, on life support and kidney dialysis along with numerous other interventions, and was looked after by dedicated nurses in intensive care. I did have ups and downs and I now know that I am very, very lucky to be alive.



Andy and Rachel on their wedding day in 2010

My parents and Andy were told that I had suffered from a Spontaneous Coronary Artery Dissection (SCAD) which happens mainly to women and often occurs during pregnancy or soon after giving birth. I sustained substantial damage to parts of my brain that look after short-term memory and I am still in that bubble today, but with the support of my therapists, family and friends I am improving slowly.

I went home to my husband and daughter on 18 March 2014, five months after my cardiac arrest. I still cannot remember basic information such as my daughter's birthday, but I use my phone and calendar to chart my week and make as many reminders and notes as I can so I can refer back to them. My neurological consultant says I have made a remarkable recovery and my family are all hoping that new pathways in my brain will form to help my short-term memory.

I employ a carer for me and my daughter, I do get out socially and travelled to New York to celebrate my 40th birthday.

My speech has taken longer to come back clearly. I can make myself understood, but it just takes more time. No-one is sure if my short-term memory will come back, but I am being taught strategies to help me and to enable me eventually to look after my beautiful daughter.

What is SCAD?

Spontaneous Coronary Artery Dissection (SCAD) is a rare heart condition that cannot be predicted or prevented – yet.

It affects people with few or none of the normal risk factors for heart disease. A tear or a bruise develops in a coronary artery resulting in a blockage that prevents normal blood flow.

SCAD affects young, fit people, mainly women, with no cardiac risk factors. SCAD can happen during or soon after pregnancy.

ECGs may look normal in SCAD patients, so troponin tests should be done to confirm a cardiac event.

Symptoms of SCAD

- ❑ central chest pain
- ❑ arm pain or numbness
- ❑ pain in the jaw, back or shoulders
- ❑ nausea
- ❑ sweating/clamminess
- ❑ breathing difficulties
- ❑ ECG can look normal



“My parents and Andy were told that I had suffered a SCAD, which happens mainly to women and often occurs during pregnancy or soon after giving birth.”

UK SCAD research & clinics

SCAD symptoms can be similar to ‘normal’ heart attacks, but because the patients are often young, fit and healthy, many have experienced misdiagnosis or delays in diagnosis. Troponin tests should be carried out to confirm a cardiac event.

Dr David Adlam is leading the UK SCAD research project at the Leicester Biomedical Research Centre. Dr Abi Al-Hussaini has worked closely with Dr Adlam during the first three years of the research project.

Contact the research team: SCAD@uhl-tr.nhs.uk

For more information about SCAD and the research project, see scad.lcbu.le.ac.uk

Information for doctors: scad.lcbu.le.ac.uk/node/10

A leaflet for clinicians can be downloaded here: bit.ly/1ZgPt0h

Dr Adlam holds NHS SCAD clinics at Glenfield Hospital. Contact julie-anne.moth@uhl-tr.nhs.uk

Dr Abi Al-Hussaini holds specialist clinics at the Chelsea & Westminster Hospital. Contact roel.caneja@chelwest.nhs.uk

Both are happy for SCAD patients to be referred to them.

*The SCAD research project received initial funding from a BHF grant. Since the grant ended, the project is being funded by the Leicester NIHR BRC and Beat SCAD.

Further information

Beat SCAD

beatscad.org.uk
facebook.com/beatscaduk
contactus@beatscad.org.uk
Youtube: bit.ly/1TXhiLV

SCAD research

mayocl.in/21BZrta (Mayo Clinic)
scad.ubc.ca/canadian-scad-study (Canada)
cle.clinic/2zfHxFL (Cleveland)
bit.ly/1SIXMzD (Massachusetts)
bit.ly/2zvmmAr (Australia)
bit.ly/2gom7m3 (European Study Group)

British Heart Foundation

bit.ly/1LaOgys & bit.ly/1T345Aj

Articles and papers about pregnancy-related SCAD

mayocl.in/2xL4Upm
bit.ly/2vogVRZ
bit.ly/2tLgNd4
bit.ly/2ua43kw
bit.ly/2tupjlg
bit.ly/2tKPqQg
bit.ly/2tjzkh8
bit.ly/2vFWvCY
bit.ly/2uDkKFc
bit.ly/2vGk2UC
bit.ly/2voc2YW
scadalliance.org/publications

Support

It's important for SCAD patients, family and friends to have support from other patients. Support is available from Beat SCAD and the closed Facebook groups listed below.

SCAD – UK & Ireland Survivors

(Facebook group for SCAD patients)
bit.ly/1Mizg9a

SCAD Family and Friends Support Group

(Facebook group)
bit.ly/1TMQDwc