

Sharon Sullivan

I never imagined that taking birth control pills would almost cost me my life.

Shortly after returning from my honeymoon, I began experiencing severe abdominal pain. Over the next 6 months my former primary doctor changed my birth control pill brand, prescribed Ibuprofen and ultimately sent me for a pelvic ultrasound. The ultrasound revealed large fibroids, and I was told I'd require major abdominal surgery to remove them. The operation was more complex than anticipated and lasted several hours. Five days after the surgery, I was released to begin my six-week recovery. I was progressing normally for two weeks, even walking a few blocks twice a day.

Two more weeks passed by and I woke up in severe pain, feeling like I had shards of glass in my lungs when I breathed deeply. I foolishly assumed it would go away, but by evening my lung pain was unbearable and I was gasping for air. My husband took me to the ER where I was initially treated for indigestion. Thankfully the ER doctor concluded to send me to get a CT Scan. We learned that my lungs were loaded down with pulmonary emboli (blood clots). I was scared to death. I wasn't very knowledgeable about Pulmonary Embolism and Deep Vein Thrombosis (DVT), but knew enough to realize that my condition could be fatal. I was given blood thinner injections, admitted to the cardiac ICU and taken to have an echocardiogram of my heart to examine any potential damage caused by blood clots passing through my heart. Other scans showed a massive DVT in several

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major veins of my right leg. The hospital hematologist ran some basic tests for genetic blood clotting disorders. The tests came back negative, despite a family history of blood clots. By the end of the week I was therapeutic on blood thinner and released with instructions to take blood thinner injections twice a day.

Later, pulmonary function tests showed I had diminished abilities in my lungs with scar tissue that would cause discomfort for some time to come. The DVT caused permanent damage to my leg veins. Their valves no longer open and close properly but were stuck open, which continued to cause me a lot of pain, swelling and tenderness. Even today, I have to wear compression stockings for the rest of my life to help alleviate these symptoms. The damage called Post Thrombotic Syndrome has symptoms nearly identical to those of a new clot. It is still quite difficult for me to assess if the pain I experience is caused by the



original DVT, or if there is a new blood clot. Since then, I've been in and out of the ER multiple times over the last two years.

Despite all of this, I'm still one of the lucky ones! I thank God every day for healing me and for providing me with an amazing pair of new doctors in Dr. Jeffrey Sherman and Dr. Craig Kessler. Through my journey these last 2 years I've encountered numerous women with similar situations, and I'm even more saddened to learn of those who did not survive.

Many doctors, including my former primary doctor, do not review the serious risks associated with taking birth control pills with their patients. They don't always ask all the necessary questions of their patients, nor question their own assumptions. My father had a serious DVT and his family had heart-related issues, but my primary doctor didn't raise any concerns about putting me on The Pill well into my thirties. My surgeon didn't think to put me on blood thinner after my surgery or to take me off birth control pills before it.

Most women don't know that taking birth control pills can greatly multiply the blood clot risks already present during surgeries or within their genetics. Women who have a genetic disorder carry a risk to develop a blood clot about 32 times greater if they consume estrogen-containing birth control pills. More detailed testing done by my new hematologist has since confirmed both my father and I have inherited clotting risks.

I believe that by sharing my story, everyone can learn from the situation and not end up like me. My husband and I have learned so much throughout this ordeal. We now know that as patients we have to be educated by researching our own conditions. It is my hope that everyone reading this article will share it with family and friends in an effort to raise awareness about the symptoms of Pulmonary Embolism and Deep Vein Thrombosis; awareness of the risks in taking birth control pills and the importance of knowing your genetic history and how it might impact your health.

To read additional stories or to find out more information, please visit The National Blood Clot Alliance's website at www.stoptheclot.org. The National Blood Clot Alliance is a patient and consumer directed voluntary health organization focusing on the needs of patients and their families. Their mission is to reduce death and disability caused by blood clots through education, awareness and increased scientific research.

