



# Don't Ignore the Warning Signs

by Lori Hartwell

When you have multiple health issues, it's easy not to trust the warning signs your body is giving you. I remember when my knees started hurting: I found myself making lifestyle changes so I could ignore the problem. I avoided stairs, drove around the parking lot to find the closest space, and kept searching for that magic pair of shoes that would make my pain go away.

After many years, I decided that it was time to stop ignoring the warning signs and get help. My orthopedist worked with me to relieve the pain and prescribed physical therapy until we finally decided that it was time for a double knee replacement.

Today, 10 years later, I don't even think about my knees any more. Recently, after one of my surgeries (and I've had over 40), I found myself not moving as much as I would like. I got tired after any activity but simply chalked it up to being out of shape.

I continued to beat myself up for lacking the motivation to exercise and believed that it was somehow a failure on my part. Then I was on a flight home from a business trip, and the flight attendant asked me whether I needed assistance. What! Did I look that bad? I called my doctor as soon as we landed, and we agreed that I would go directly to the emergency room.

I felt fine when I was sitting down, but got really tired whenever I exerted myself at all. My hemoglobin was good, so, again, I told myself that either lack of motivation was keeping me from recovering from my latest surgery or else I was just getting old.

As it turned out, the oxygen levels in my blood dropped significantly when I exerted myself, leaving me feeling exhausted from lack of oxygen, not lack of motivation. My team of doctors addressed the issue (Probably a reaction to a medication) and got me on a plan to improve. Voilà—I started to feel like myself again. If you don't ignore the warning signs, you can be on the road to recovery sooner.

## Warning Signs of Life Threatening Illness

Note that there's some overlap in symptoms. Report them to your doctor; don't try to diagnose yourself.

### Blood Pressure:

#### Too High or Too Low

- Blurred vision
- Chest pain
- Cold, clammy, pale skin
- Dehydration and unusual thirst
- Dizziness or light-headedness
- Fainting
- Fatigue
- Inability to concentrate
- Irregular heartbeat
- Nausea
- Pounding in your chest or ears
- Rapid, shallow breathing
- Severe headache
- Vision problems

### Blood Sugar:

#### Too High or Too Low

- Anxiety
- Blurred vision
- Dizziness
- Drowsiness
- Extreme hunger and/or thirst
- Frequent urination
- Irritability
- Nausea
- Rapid heartbeat
- Shaking
- Sweating
- Weakness and tiredness
- Infection
- Drainage, redness, swelling, or warmth at your incision or catheter site
- Fatigue
- Fever
- Pain

### Kidney Disease

- Change in skin color (a yellowish tint)
- Changes in urination (frequency, color, foam)
- Difficulty in concentrating
- Fragile bones
- Headaches
- Increased fatigue and lack of energy
- Insomnia
- Itchy skin
- Loss of appetite
- Mental confusion
- Metallic taste in the mouth
- Nausea and/or vomiting
- Swelling or numbness in the feet, ankles, or hands
- Twitching muscles, especially in the legs

### Stroke

- Confusion or trouble understanding
- Dizziness
- Numbness or weakness in your face, arm, or leg, especially on one side
- Severe headache that comes on for no reason
- Trouble seeing with one or both eyes
- Trouble speaking, walking, or keeping your balance

Sources: WebMD.org  
MayoClinic.org  
Diabetes.org

Lori Hartwell, Founder & President of the Renal Support Network (RSN), was diagnosed with kidney disease at the age of two. In 1993 she founded RSN to instill "health, happiness and hope" into the lives of those affected by chronic kidney disease. Lori is also the author of the inspirational book "Chronically Happy: Joyful Living in Spite of Chronic Illness" and is a four-time kidney transplant recipient.