Debbie was 20 years old, in the Air Force, living on a base in South Dakota, and 7 months pregnant when preeclampsia struck the first time. Everything went dark - literally. She passed out from extremely high blood pressure and when she woke she had been diagnosed with preeclampsia. Scared, confused, and without any answers from her healthcare providers, she was put on bed rest and told that everything would be alright.

The year was 1985 and the medical community did not know much about preeclampsia - formerly known as toxemia — and its devastating emotional and physical toll on women, their babies, and their families, much less the link to heart disease.

Fast forward 16 years to 2001. Second pregnancy, second bout with preeclampsia. Debbie was older, wiser, and better educated about pregnancy. She took better care of herself and was more aware. Yet this time the preeclampsia and it’s postpartum effects were even more serious. She would not find out until years later that having preeclampsia dramatically increases a woman’s chance of developing — and dying — from heart disease.

Since her last experience with preeclampsia, she has had two transient ischemic attacks (mini strokes) and is also very concerned about her heart as she has a family history of heart disease. Debbie is also managing multiple risk factors, which keep her focused on maintaining a healthy weight, eating right, and regularly participating in yoga and spin classes.

Debbie wants all women to understand the link between preeclampsia and heart disease so that they can manage their risk. Women who have had preeclampsia have double the risk for heart disease and stroke 5 to 15 years after delivery; and, two out of three women who experience preeclampsia will die from heart disease.

You are also at increased risk for heart disease and stroke if:

- your baby was delivered pre-term
- your baby weighed less than 5 1/2 pounds
- you suffered from severe preeclampsia more than once
- you are African American or Hispanic

To help manage risk, be sure to talk to your healthcare providers and let them know:

- if you experienced preeclampsia in any of your pregnancies
- if you experienced gestational diabetes in any of your pregnancies
- if any of your babies were born more than three weeks before the due date
- if any of your babies weighed less than 5 1/2 pounds at birth

Visit www.preeclampsia.org to learn more about the link between preeclampsia and heart disease and how to manage your risk.