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Cause Draft

 I started taking medicine for hypertension late in the fall, right before my birthday. I had struggled for weeks, denying that I needed the medicine. Although my doctor told me I would benefit from a little something, I was convinced I was too young and too healthy to need a medication to control my blood pressure. So finally, with much skepticism, I started taking the medicine.

 The first week of taking the medication daily was mostly uneventful. I was a little sluggish, wanted to nap a lot, and felt like I was always running to the bathroom. My blood pressure was down. Maybe the doctor was right. I mean, he did go to school for many years and did know more about internal medicine than I did. I wasn’t overly happy about taking blood pressure medication, but I had accepted it.

 The first thing I remember noticing is waking up in the middle of the night with leg cramps. It wasn’t terribly alarming. The back of one of my calves or the other would just feel knotted up and the pain would wake me. I would just sit up, massage my leg, and eventually it would resolve, and I went back to sleep. I remember thinking maybe I just needed to drink more water. I went on with my normal routine.

 Although I wasn’t pregnant, I started having the strangest cravings. I wanted things like Chinese food, salted pretzels, fries with extra salt, and basically anything that was salty. Normally, I didn’t like especially like salty foods. I never added salt to anything. I couldn’t get enough of it now though. Because I was eating so much sodium, I was increasing my water intake. At this point, I knew it was obviously a side effect of the medicine I was taking, but my blood pressure was good. I was checking it all the time and writing it down. I thought I was being a compliant patient, I thought everything was fine, just a few muscle cramps and a little extra salt.

 Maybe three or four weeks into taking the medications I started having a few dizzy spells, but they never lasted long so I really didn’t pay them attention. The real moment I realized something was wrong was the afternoon I started having chest pains. I was driving to do some shopping and I suddenly felt like someone had my chest in a vice grip. I had never felt anything like that before. It wasn’t like something so painful you couldn’t stand it, It was more like something so heavy on my chest I couldn’t get any air in my lungs. I felt dizzy and suffocated at the same time. I remember thing there is no way I am having a heart attack. I was way too young for that. I was reminding myself to stay calm and not panic when it occurred to me that I also thought I was too young to have high blood pressure. I went to the emergency room.

 The next few hours were a blur of things like oxygen, blood work, ekg, x ray, intravenous therapy. At some point I realized I wasn’t going to die, but something was definitely wrong. When all the testing was done, and the results were back, the doctor came in to explain the cause of all my symptoms were. The blood pressure medicine I was taking controls blood pressure by reducing volume in my blood/fluid. It is a diuretic. It was causing me to urinate more, and that was how I was losing too much potassium. The heart is controlled by a balance of sodium and potassium. If that balance is off, it will cause muscle fatigue, muscle cramps, cardiac arrhythmias, chest pain, myocardial infarct, and eventually death if left untreated. Hypokalemia is a serious, but treatable condition. It is caused by and increased loss of potassium through the urine. The high blood pressure medication increased the frequency and amount of urine excretion, and inevitably the hypokalemia.

 I stayed overnight in the hospital. I received a couple of infusions of potassium. The infusions were long, and often made my skin burn. I stopped the diuretic, and received potassium to correct the deficiency. Strangely, my blood pressure, which was the issue that started this mess, remained within normal limits the entire time. It took weeks for my body to become hypokalemic, but only hours to be back to normal. Overall, after knowing the cause of the event made me feel better. I learned to always know the side effects of any medications after this event.