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Bob and Mary Vogel are advocates of calcium screening after the simple \$50 test resulted in triple bypass surgery that saved Bob's life. Photo by Jim Lundstrom.

How a \$50 Test Saved a Southern Door Farmer's Life

by JIM LUNDSTROM
jim@ppulse.com

Mary Vogel became a firm believer in a routine procedure called a calcium screening test when it saved the life of her husband Bob.

"A calcium screening test is just \$50. Granted, it's out of pocket, but it's the best \$50 you will ever spend," she said.

Bob and Mary have a farm on Cloverleaf Road in Gardner. Bob works the farm while Mary works for Kwik Trip in Green Bay.

In 2015, Bob was noticing pains and tiredness.

"He would complain that he was tired. We basically thought it was from being out of shape," Mary said. "When he would get the pains, he thought it was pulling himself up on the tractor and pulling stones. He would just come in the house and lay down and then go again."

Mary said Bob, 55, always had aches and pains from farming, but this time they were not going away, so the Vogels decided Bob should visit their family doctor. He recommended that Bob undergo a calcium screening, which is a CT scan that examines the coronary arteries for calcium blockage.

"We said, let's do the calcium screening test to see if it's your heart or you're just getting old," Mary said. "He did the calcium screening test. They always say it's between 0 and 500. You want to be at zero. His came back at a little over 400. That means, uh-oh."

The test was on Dec. 21, 2015. A stress test was scheduled for the first week of the new year with Dr. Ciprian Nedelcu of Aurora BayCare Cardiology.

"He flunked the stress test," Mary said. "The next up was to go in for stents. They tried, but they couldn't get them in. They said, 'Now we're going to have to have heart surgery, triple bypass.' That was scary. That was hard for me to hear."

Dr. Alexander Roitstein of BayCare Clinic Cardiothoracic Surgery performed the triple bypass on Jan. 21, 2016, and determined that the pains and tiredness Bob had been feeling were probably from four heart attacks he had unknowingly suffered.

"I never, ever thought it was a heart attack because he doesn't have heart disease on his side of the family. My side has it, so I was thinking I would be the one," Mary said. "This didn't just happen. It was coming. They did say that if he wouldn't have had the calcium screening and found this out, he wouldn't have lived six months."

Dr. Matthew Schmidt, interventional cardiologist at Aurora BayCare, on the calcium screening test and bypass surgery. A calcium screening test is basically a limited CT scan of just the heart that shows any plaque occurring in the heart arteries.

What warning signs are you looking for in calcium screening test results?

The computer is able to look at the CT image and add up all the points where the calcium is showing up in arteries. It produces a number from 0 to over 1,000. This number indicates the amount of build-up taking place. If we find plaque and calcium build up in the arteries we often are able to recommend steps to prevent additional plaque build-up. Even if your score is high, that doesn't always mean there is blockage or narrowing in those arteries.

Each case is different, so we recommend testing and next steps based on the calcium score and variety of other factors that your physical will help you determine.

Who is a candidate for the test?

Anyone who has risk factors for coronary disease, including a family history, smoking, high blood pressure or high cholesterol should consider this test. Often we see young people in their 30s and 40s having this test because they have a family history of heart disease. It is available to everyone at a \$50 cost and the test doesn't require a physician order.

Give an overview on how triple bypass surgery works.

Sometimes advanced blockages are treated with bypass surgery. We start by opening the breast bone, then the surgeon reroutes the blood around the heart artery blockage by taking a vein from the leg or artery from the chest wall.

Bob even advised Mary to get a calcium screening.

"His words were that I want you to get it because I want to know that you're OK, because, basically who would take care of him?" she said.

She happily scored a zero in the test, and she advises everyone to get one.

"See your doctor. Listen to what they say," she said. "Listen to your own body and your aches and pains. Men especially think, 'I'm supposed to be this rock.' They say it's harder to admit you're not the one in charge or you're not strong enough. So it was a little bit harder for him to cope with that. We went through semi-depression."

But today she said Bob feels much better, although what took place is a blur to him.

"He does have energy now if he wants to use it. He feels 100 percent better," she said.