

Erin Dunnigan

Erin Dunnigan began her love affair with running while attending college. She had some friends who ran track in high school, so she tagged along with them to the gym and would run an occasional mile or two. Eventually she tried her hand at a half-marathon and has been an avowed runner ever since.

When she was 22, Dunnigan really upped her game and began training for a triathlon and decided to use a heart rate monitor. On her first run with the device, Dunnigan's heart rate registered above 210 bpm.

"I honestly thought the monitor was faulty," she said. So she tried another monitor but got the same results. She checked her heart rate manually at the gym, which also yielded an abnormally elevated heart rate.

In an effort to get to the bottom of the issue, Dunnigan's physician scheduled her for an EKG, which came back normal. Eventually she was sent in for an echo test, which revealed that Dunnigan had a condition called *cor triatriatum*, an extra membrane separating one of the chambers in her heart.

"I was one of the lucky few that had a hole in the membrane, so blood could still flow, just not efficiently, but the membrane still needed to be removed," she said.

Luckily her cardiac surgeon was the first in the state of Missouri to employ the Da Vinci robotic surgery system on cardiac patients and was confident it would be a faster and safer alternative to open heart surgery.

"A few weeks later, I was the first person to have a robot remove an extra membrane from my heart, and I was well on the way to recovery," Dunnigan said.

When she was medically cleared to return to her normal life, her doctor encouraged her to keep running. More than 10 years later she's still going strong, and wants others to use her successes as an example for their own recovery.

"The importance of moving, in any way, to keep that heart active and healthy is something I won't give up on," she said.