

A full-page photograph of Jennie Garth, a blonde woman with a red flower in her hair, wearing a bright red, sleeveless, floor-length gown with a white undergarment visible at the bust. She is smiling and standing on a red carpet. The background is dark with some blurred lights.

Getting to the Heart of the Matter

Jennie Garth, of TV's "90210," puts great stock in heart-health education.

Having played a popular student at Beverly Hills High School in “90210,” actress Jennie Garth returns this fall to the CW network’s reprise of the series—all grown up and back at school. But at 37, Jennie has updated the role of Kelly Taylor, the one that made her recognizable to a generation of fans. Back then a glam teen model, Kelly is now a single mom who works as a high school guidance counselor.

Thanks to the skills she’s learned in show biz, the Illinois born and bred actress says she knows how to get a message across by delivering her lines for

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the best effect. But these days, it isn’t all for show. She now has a very personal message to share: “I want people to know about the risks of heart disease, and to learn what they can do to keep their hearts healthy,” says Jennie, who is married to actor Peter Facinelli (star of the movie sensation *Twilight*) and is the mother of three young daughters, Luca Bella, 12, Lola Ray, 6, and Fiona Eve, 3.

Why the urgency? Because Jennie and her family know the pain of heart disease firsthand. “My father died of heart disease in March 2008,” she says. Although it was the end of a long struggle for her dad, his death served as a wake-up call for Jennie. “Heart disease runs rampant on my father’s side of the family,” she says,

explaining that her father had the first of five heart surgeries when she was just 9 years old. “It was tough to see him go through that for more than 25 years.”

Heart disease: A family affair

Jennie says her dad’s health problems had a tremendous impact on the whole family. “Because of the pain my family experienced,” she says, “I’m doing all I can to keep my own family’s hearts healthy—including my own.”

Understandably, she takes her genetic predisposition to heart disease very seriously. “I gave myself a unique 30th

birthday gift,” she says. “I took myself to a cardiologist for a baseline heart exam.”

What Jennie learned as a result of that exam caught her off guard. “I expected the doctor to say everything was fine, so I couldn’t believe it when he said he’d found something wrong.” An electrocardiogram (ECG)—a recording of the heart’s electrical activity—led to other tests, which revealed that Jennie has a condition called *aortic regurgitation*, also known as a “leaky valve.”

This occurs when one of the heart’s valves doesn’t close completely, which causes blood to leak back out through it. Because of the leakage, the heart has to work much harder to pump blood

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What Does a Leaky Valve Cost You?

A leaky valve, technically known as *aortic regurgitation*, can range from mild to severe. Many people go for years—or even their whole lives—with no symptoms, according to experts at the American Heart Association. But if the condition worsens, the following symptoms may appear. If they do, be sure to check with your doctor:

- ✦ Fatigue (especially during times of increased activity)
- ✦ Shortness of breath
- ✦ Retaining fluid in certain parts of the body, such as the ankles
- ✦ Abnormal heartbeats
- ✦ Chest pain or discomfort caused by reduced blood supply to the heart muscle

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throughout the body. Eventually, the heart may become enlarged, and other complications can develop (see “What Does a Leaky Valve Cost You?”).

An unexpected diagnosis

Jennie left the doctor’s office shaking her head. Her doctor assured her that her condition was quite common, and that she needn’t be overly concerned. But she was. “I thought I wasn’t going to be like my dad when it came to my heart,” Jennie recalls. “Ironically, a leaky valve is one thing my dad never experienced.”

The upside to her diagnosis? It did explain a lot of things, she says. “For years, I’d sometimes have a little fluttery feeling in my chest near my heart, especially if I was lying on my side. Other times, I’d just feel that something was different—only for a second or two.”

Now that she had a diagnosis, the pieces finally fit together. “It’s good I know about it, and that it’s something that needs to be watched,” she says. “So I go for regular checkups.”

The actress is also vigilant about keeping her daughters’ and husband’s hearts healthy. “I watch their salt intake and their bad fat intake, the same as I do for myself.” Jennie, who has a passion for cooking, also modifies her favorite recipes to promote heart health. “I fry taco shells in healthy oils,” she says. “And I don’t have saturated fats in the house.”


A wake-up call for women

But her heartfelt message extends far beyond her own family. Jennie has joined forces with the American Heart Association to educate others about heart disease. “Women need to know that heart disease is their No. 1 enemy—and killer.”

That’s because one thing Jennie has learned for sure over the years is that women are at greater risk of heart dis-

ease than they think. “Because of my family, I associated heart disease with men—often with older men,” she states. “But my own diagnosis changed everything for me.”

In fact, the actress’s desire to alert others to the dangers of heart disease led her to donate \$50,000 of her own money to fund local heart disease education and research in her hometown of Urbana, Ill.

Despite living a star-studded life in Hollywood, Jennie says her day-to-day existence is much the same as anyone else’s. She shops for groceries at big-box stores and cheers from the sidelines at her daughters’ soccer games. As a result of her own experiences, she knows what’s really important in life. “My family is my No. 1 priority,” she says. “They’re my heart.” 

—Gina Roberts-Grey

3 Steps to Heart Health

Ever since she learned about her own heart condition, Jennie Garth has worked the following strategies into her life to keep her heart strong for decades to come. They can help you and your family, too.

Eat for your heart. Jennie starts each day with a bowl of oatmeal. Skim milk and honey are low-fat, natural ways to flavor it and be good to your heart.

Work the most important muscle. Exercise for your “insides.” It’s fine to set weight goals to look good in clothes, but don’t forget about the importance of exercising for your heart. For women, even carrying a little extra weight around the middle can increase the risk of heart disease.

Chill out. Taking the kids to the park, gardening, horseback riding, and experimenting with heart-healthy recipes are just a few of the ways Jennie keeps stress from taxing her heart.

