

# Trust Your Gut

A Survivor's Guide to Medical  
Advocacy and Emotional  
Healing

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## When Things Went Wrong

By the third day at home, I knew something was wrong.

It began with a fever. Not a mild, manageable rise in temperature; this was different. It was intense, sudden, and relentless. My whole body trembled. I couldn't get warm no matter how many blankets I pulled over myself. I was freezing on the outside and burning on the inside. My body was screaming for attention.

Early Sunday morning, around 12:30 a.m., I was admitted to the emergency room. They ran every test they could, but even that was limited because I'm allergic to iodine, so they had to avoid some scans that could have provided more precise answers.

Still, by 6 a.m., the ER doctor had seen enough. He told me he wanted to admit me. Then, he said something that sent a chill down my spine: my gynecologist, who had been there overnight on call for her pregnant patients, had already told him I should be sent home with antibiotics and instructed me to follow up with her on that Monday or Tuesday.

That didn't sit right with me. At all. I was still in pain with the meds they were providing, offering little relief.

I looked the ER doctor in the eye and asked, “If you were me, would you go home?”

Without hesitation, he said, “No.”

That was all I needed. His quiet conviction gave me the courage to trust myself. So, I stayed.

They officially admitted me around 9 a.m. Sunday morning, after a round of discussion between my gynecologist and the hospital administrator. But what followed was anything but care. They left me in the admitting area, a space with a curtain, rather than a room, and I had no doctor checking in on me; only the admitting nurses were present.

No plan. No updates. Just pain medication and silence.

I lay there all day, growing weaker and more feverish. At one point, I told a nurse, “I feel like I’m going to die.”

She smiled and said lightly, “Oh no, we can’t have you do that. Too much paperwork.”

Her words stung more than I let show. I was in visible distress, but it was met with sarcasm instead of urgency. And in that moment, I felt something more profound than pain. I felt **invisible**.

It’s a feeling too many Black women know.

There’s a long, painful history in medicine of our pain being underestimated, our concerns being brushed off, and our instincts being ignored. That day, lying on that bed, burning up with fever, I felt the weight of that history press down on me.

I wasn't just fighting for my life; I was fighting to be taken seriously.

Hours passed. No one came. My fever remained high. The pain was almost unbearable.

Finally, around 10 p.m., a partner of my gynecologist arrived after my constant requests, my mother's requests, and my sister's requests. It wasn't until then that she realized the urgency of my situation. Only then, nearly 24 hours after I'd arrived, did they begin taking action. I was finally transferred to a hospital room just before midnight.

The on-call doctor told me she hadn't come down earlier because she was told her only job was to administer pain medication as I asked for it. No one had told her how critical my condition was.

That's when everything changed.

The next morning, a general surgeon came in to conduct a simple evaluation on me. He was calm, focused, and direct.

#### **SIDEBAR: Why Black Women Are at Higher Risk**

Black women in the U.S. are **three times more likely to die** from pregnancy-related causes than white women—even when income and education levels are similar.

Research also shows that **Black patients' pain is often underestimated or ignored.**

*Source: CDC and the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*

This isn't just poor bedside manner. It's systemic. It's why our voices, and our gut instincts, must be honored.

“Tell me which hurts more,” he asked, “when I press down on your stomach, or when I let go?”

I was expecting that when he pressed down for the pain, it would be great.

He pressed down. It hurt.

But when he released, I screamed.

The pain was searing-hot, searing through my abdomen like fire. His face shifted. “We need to get you to surgery. Now.”

What I didn’t know, what I couldn’t have known, was that I was septic. My body was in the stages of shutting down. The surgical site had been compromised. Somewhere during the initial surgery, my bowels had been perforated. Bacteria had been leaking into my abdomen for days.

Left untreated, it would have killed me.

When I went under for emergency surgery, my level of fear was high, but I was hopeful and faithful that all would work out.

I remember being wheeled into surgery in my hospital bed with my mother and mother-in-law right there with me. I remember being in the operating room and the general surgeon sharing that this is just an exploratory surgery. He would insert a camera just to see what was going on. I also remember my mother asking questions, and my final words being, “make sure you wake me up”.

I do remember being awakened in my hospital room.

The room was dim, quiet, sterile. I blinked slowly, trying to process where I was, what had happened. My mouth was dry. My body ached. And something felt... different.

That's when they told me.

They'd had to remove six inches of my colon. My bowels had been perforated, likely during the initial surgery, and the resulting infection had caused sepsis. They had to act quickly to save my life, and the only way to do that was to give my colon time to heal.

And that meant a colostomy bag.

I remember the moment the words landed. I hadn't even gotten past the tube in my nose to even notice a bag. I heard them, but I couldn't fully absorb them. I was alive, barely, but now I had a bag attached to my body collecting waste. Just days ago, I was running a business, managing a household, and supporting my son's dreams.



Now, I was lying in a hospital bed with tubes, staples, and something I didn't recognize as part of me.

I was in shock. And beneath the shock was grief.

No one prepares you for what it feels like to wake up from surgery and discover your body has been fundamentally changed without a heads-up. No one warns you about the disorientation, the helplessness, the quiet devastation of realizing your life will never be quite the same again.

I didn't know how to feel. I was thankful to be alive, yes, but I was also angry. Angry that I'd trusted the wrong doctor. Angry that my pain had been brushed off. Angry that my voice had nearly been silenced forever.

And yet, even in those early moments of confusion and loss, one truth anchored me: **I had chosen to stay**. I had chosen to listen to my body. I had advocated for myself when no one else would.

And that choice saved my life.

I stayed in the hospital for two weeks after that emergency surgery. Those first few days were some of the darkest of my life.

The physical pain was intense—but it wasn't the worst part. It was the **grief**. The grief over what had happened to my body, the betrayal I felt from a medical system that nearly let me die, and the overwhelming fear of what my life would look like now.

I was withdrawn. Quiet. I didn't want to do much of anything, except work. I wanted to feel normal, so I asked for my computer to work. But that was not possible.

My will to live had dimmed, almost extinguished. There were moments when I felt like giving up would have been easier than facing the reality I had just woken up into.

I was supposed to be home recovering from a one-night stay. Instead, I lay in a hospital bed, tired, confused, crying without warning. Some days, the depression came like a storm I couldn't stop. The nurses couldn't always find my veins. My body ached. I wanted to scream. I often did, silently.

One night, as my husband tried to sleep beside me in a recliner, I sat upright, weeping. I couldn't hold it in. I cried until my chest hurt. The nightshift nurse came in to draw blood, again, but instead of brushing past me, she stopped. She saw my pain. She comforted me. She tried.

There were nights I asked myself, *Am I going to leave this place alive?*

There were mornings I was too exhausted to fight anymore.

But I had a village.

My mother never left my side. Day after day, she sat with me, held my hand, whispered prayers when I couldn't speak any myself. My mother-in-law was also there, doing the same, and was there to keep my mother company during the day.



My husband, Derrick, showed up with the strength I didn't even know I needed - calm, steady, and present every night. My sister and some of my friends, who are nurses, came in with notebooks and questions. They didn't let the medical team gloss over anything. They **advocated** for me when I couldn't. They protected my dignity, asked about my medications, clarified treatment plans, and made sure I was never overlooked again.

They showed me, through their actions, that **my life was still valuable**.

That I was still *me*.

Slowly, that belief began to take root inside me again. Alongside their support was my faith, quiet at first, but always there. A voice in my spirit reminded me that if I had fought this hard to stay alive, then there must be more for me to do. I wasn't done yet.

Something began to shift.

I started sitting up more. My will to get out of the hospital had me up and walking as much as I could. I began engaging with the nurses, thanking them, even cracking jokes. I asked questions. I smiled again. I tried.

And they noticed.

Doctors and nurses would tell me they loved coming into my room because of my energy. They said I made their shifts brighter. They said my positive attitude was inspiring and that kind of mindset could do more for healing than any prescription.

They didn't know how close I had come to losing that spirit altogether. But the words of family and friends reminded me that **hope was just as contagious as pain**, and that I had a choice in how I would carry this story forward.

That's when I began to heal.

### **Key Takeaway:**

Dismissal is dangerous. If something feels wrong, say something, and keep saying it! Your symptoms are not an inconvenience. They are information.