

From Brain Surgery to Iron Man



When Fred started feeling like he had a chronic case of influenza, he knew something was wrong. “I was 46 years-old, and I considered myself pretty darned healthy and fit, but when I started feeling sick and couldn’t beat it, I knew I had to get help,” Fred says. “In addition to typical flu symptoms, I also had episodes of vertigo that came out of nowhere, along with panic attacks and eventually vision problems that are still difficult for me to describe.”

Because of his vision impairment, Fred’s first visit was to an optometrist for his annual eye exam, and his eyes checked out fine. He was still having vision difficulty, but he wrote it off as an unfortunate side effect of aging. However, when his other symptoms persisted, he decided it was time to visit his primary care physician to get rid of what he thought was a nagging virus or infection. He figured he’d get some antibiotics and be on his way but things didn’t go as he had planned.

“I saw my primary care physician, [Jason L. Primer, MD](#), at Northwestern Memorial on Friday, June 5, 2009, and he knew right away that I wasn’t just suffering from a bad case of the flu. He ordered an MRI of my brain, which I had done on Tuesday, June 9,” Fred explained. “The results came back on Friday, June 12 – I had a pituitary macroadenoma. That is, in layman terms, a tumor on the pituitary gland. Mine was not cancerous, but it did need to be removed.”

Dr. Primer wanted Fred to see a specialist as soon as possible, so he sent him to [Christopher C. Getch, MD](#), a neurosurgeon at Northwestern Memorial, the following Monday. Dr. Getch met with Fred on behalf of [James P. Chandler, MD](#) because Dr. Chandler was in surgery and was unavailable at that time. When Dr. Getch saw the results of Fred’s MRI, he told Fred he should meet with Dr. Chandler as soon as possible. Dr. Chandler has extensive experience with pituitary macroadenomas, so he seemed the obvious choice to the referring physicians. Fred set up a consultation with Dr. Chandler, and it went very well, so he scheduled surgery on June 30, 2009. He felt a level of confidence with Dr. Chandler’s ability that helped him get over the fear of surgery. “Although I was frightened about having surgery, the fact that Dr. Chandler was so respected in this field and had done so many of the same surgeries, put my mind at ease,” says Fred. “And it didn’t hurt that he thought there was a possibility I might be able to participate in the Ironman triathlon as scheduled.”

From Hospital to Ironman

Fred walked out of the hospital the day after surgery thankful that he could recover so quickly. He did have some uncomfortable congestion, but nothing that prevented him from walking down the street to his home. “Five days later, I found myself feeling so much better, that I decided to treat myself to some shopping at Water Tower Place. It was then that I realized that some of my visual problems had already improved and many other symptoms had immediately vanished.”

“Five weeks after surgery, Dr. Chandler gave me the thumbs-up to return to hard-core cardio exercise. Within another five weeks, I was able to race an Ironman triathlon, exactly 75 days after my surgery. It was my fifth Ironman, and at 15 hours, it wasn’t my fastest, but it wasn’t my slowest either. I had been registered for the race for a year, but my condition had prevented me from training until the final five weeks before race day.”

“Four weeks after that Ironman, I ran the Chicago Marathon (my 22nd marathon), which turned out to be my fastest marathon to date. Since the surgery, my energy level has improved and my athletic achievements seem to come a bit easier. I thank Dr. Chandler for helping me get to this point. I couldn’t have done it without him.”

Back to Feeling Good

Fred says he could write a thick book about everything that happened to him during his illness. However, he says, “the important thing is that my panic attacks have faded away and my ability to concentrate has come back. Before I found out about my tumor, I had described to my wife that I felt like I was almost having a constant out-of-body experience, like I didn't really feel like I was here.”

Although finding out he had a tumor wasn’t good news, knowing that something had caused his symptoms helped assure him that he wasn’t losing his mind. “Within a couple of weeks after surgery, I once again felt fully immersed in reality, and no longer on the verge of panic as a constant state,” Fred says. “Since surgery, I've become normal again. Thanks in great part to Dr. Chandler, his skills as a surgeon, and his supportive, encouraging nature, I feel totally normal and I function the way I should. I would absolutely recommend Dr. Chandler and Northwestern Memorial Hospital to anyone with a pituitary tumor. He likely saved my life, and he most definitely helped me get back to my life in record time. I am grateful to him and to the entire team at Northwestern Memorial.”