

Spinal surgery restores young woman's active lifestyle

Heather McDonald is young, healthy and active, so when shoulder pain woke her in the middle of the night she didn't think much of it. The pain she experienced persisted and turned into numbness.

"I had my husband pinch the back of my arm and I felt nothing," said McDonald, a fitness boot camp instructor. "I went to the chiropractor a few times and thought maybe I was working out too much and teaching too many classes, so I should just give it a break."

"It got to the point when I'd drive over a bump, it felt like I was having a heart attack," said McDonald. "I also couldn't sleep at night."

McDonald decided it was time to visit a medical doctor. The diagnosis was a viral infection that could take a couple of months to heal. Despite the passage of time, her pain continued.

"My mom, being the persistent mother she is, called every day begging me to visit another doctor," said McDonald.

She decided to visit another doctor who ordered a MRI. On the MRI they found a growth on McDonald's spine. The doctor referred her to Mary Hlavin, MD, a neurosurgeon at Neurosurgical Clinic of Cedar Rapids.

McDonald visited Dr. Hlavin the very next day. Dr. Hlavin told her the tumor would need to be removed.

"That was an eye-opening moment," McDonald explained. "I was thinking all right I'm not invincible. I really wasn't hearing anything. You just can't grasp the concept of it."

After speaking with Dr. Hlavin, and going over the procedure in detail, McDonald became more comfortable with her situation and the necessary steps that needed to be taken. She was especially comforted by Dr. Hlavin's calm demeanor and confidence while explaining the procedure.

"I knew everything was going to be OK, but I still hadn't grasped it all yet," said McDonald. "Dr. Hlavin grabbed my hands, looked me in the eye and said 'I need to make sure you understand what we are doing.' That instilled confidence in me. Everything about our conversation made me feel I was going to be OK. She sat and answered my questions for two hours; nothing else mattered to her at that time except for me and my situation."

Spinal surgery

In order to remove the growth from McDonald's spine, Dr. Hlavin performed a laminectomy. The laminectomy involved removing a portion of McDonald's back bone to gain access to the spinal canal where the tumor was growing.

The surgery, which Dr. Hlavin had anticipated taking around three hours to complete, lasted more than five. Once inside McDonald's spinal canal they found the tumor intertwined with nerves.

"What we found when we started to remove the tumor, was that it was attached to one of the nerve groups that goes to Heather's hand, so we unfortunately were not able to remove it entirely," said Dr. Hlavin. "We were concerned if we got it all we would leave her with some nerve damage and possibly paralysis."

According to Dr. Hlavin, the small part of the tumor left in McDonald's spine will be monitored and observed in the future. Her hope is that it will not recur, since the vast

majority of it was removed and the blood supply was cut off. If not, future treatment will be necessary.

Recovery

After her procedure, McDonald spent six days at St. Luke's, and for the first four had to lay completely flat.

"Recovery can be very uncomfortable for patients," said Dr. Hlavin. "We cut through a lot of neck and upper back muscles, and because we open up the sac that contains the

spinal fluid patients experience nausea and headaches. But I suspect by two months she'll be feeling back to normal, if not better than she did prior to her surgery."

"It was so weird for me to completely put my life in other people's hands," said McDonald of those first four days in the hospital. "On the fifth day I felt a lot better."

After leaving the hospital McDonald participated in intense physical therapy to strengthen her neck and back, as well as

occupational therapy to work with the hand impacted by the tumor intertwined in the nerve group.

"I'm very happy I have full function of my hand," said McDonald. "I'm very pleased with the decision Dr. Hlavin made."

McDonald can feel her arm again and is relieved to no longer be a person who has pain running her life.

"I don't have to be near the house if we decide to go shopping, to a movie or

concert out of fear of pain," said McDonald with a big smile. "Now I have no worries. I don't have to think about things any more and have no hesitancy. I can just do it."

Today McDonald's life is back to normal and there are no traces of the tumor left in her spine.

To watch Heather's video story and her spine surgery log on to stlukescr.org and look for the "Inside St. Luke's OR" banner.



Heather McDonald enjoys a camping trip with her family after spinal surgery.

Inside Operating St. Luke's Room

The video version of Inside St. Luke's Operating Room is available on St. Luke's Website and follows four patients as they undergo surgeries that will change their lives.



Bob Mann Dr. Jon Rippentrop

Bob Mann – Robotic surgery

A Central Iowa man learns his prostate cancer diagnosis from his family doctor and travels

to St. Luke's where Dr. Jon Rippentrop performs robotic surgery.



Don Kirkberger Dr. James Levett

Don Kirkberger – Open-heart surgery

A Center Point man recognizes the warning signs of a heart attack and has

ten blockages repaired during a complex open-heart surgery performed by Dr. James Levett.



Patrick Hills Dr. Sandeep Munjal

Patrick Hills – Total knee replacement

A painful arthritic knee

man to visit Dr. Sandeep Munjal, who performs a rapid recovery total knee replacement surgery.



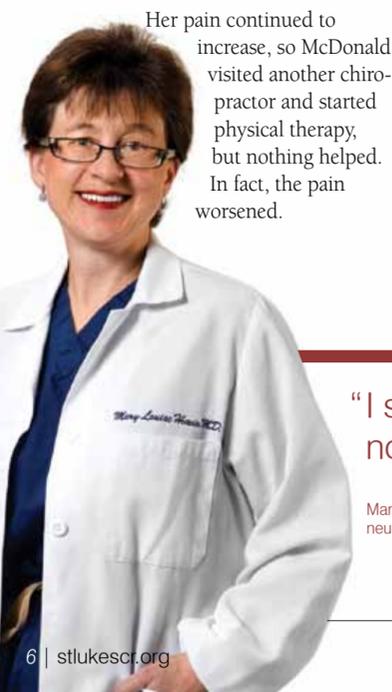
Heather McDonald Dr. Mary Hlavin

Heather McDonald Spine surgery

After suffering from arm pain, a young woman is

diagnosed with a tumor in her spine. Dr. Mary Hlavin takes on this case to restore full use of the patient's arm.

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