

How Ditching Painkillers for a Healthy Diet Post-Whipple Procedure Cured Mark's Chronic Pain

Living with cancer is a challenging journey filled with ups and downs. Mark's story is no different. When he was diagnosed with bile duct cancer—or Cholangiocarcinoma specifically—he embarked on a journey from diagnosis through surgery and post-treatment survivorship, which included a complex surgery called a Whipple procedure, chemotherapy, and radiation.

While each phase of Mark's cancer journey brought newfound challenges, it was the pain relief that he struggled with most. Thankfully, Mark found new hope in the University of Cincinnati Cancer Center's survivorship services. Our care team provided supportive services, like nutritional planning and acupuncture, to help Mark unlock a new, healthy diet and lifestyle that reduced pain, lessened the need for painkillers and drugs, and improved his overall health.

From Diagnosis to Whipple Procedure

Mark's journey started with a diagnosis of bile duct cancer—a rare type of cancer in which malignant cells form in the bile ducts. It's also called Cholangiocarcinoma. Similar to pancreatic cancer, this cancer can cause symptoms like jaundice and stomach pain. When Mark was first diagnosed, there was a misconception that his condition fell under pancreatic cancer. While there are similarities in surgical procedures, this distinction is crucial because understanding the unique aspects of his condition helped guide his surgery, treatment decisions, and long-term pain management plan.

Common Symptoms of Bile Duct Cancer

Bile duct cancer may not have any noticeable symptoms, or it can be hard to spot. These symptoms can include:

- Yellowing of your skin or the whites of your eyes (Jaundice)
- Itchy skin
- Darker urine and paler feces
- Loss of appetite or losing weight without trying to
- Feeling generally unwell
- Feeling tired or having no energy
- High temperature or shivers

Mark's doctor and surgeon recommended that Mark undergo surgery—the Whipple procedure. Whipple procedures are complex operations to remove cancer in which a specialized surgeon removes the head of the pancreas, the first part of the small intestine (duodenum), the gallbladder, and the bile duct.

In this intricate surgery, a UC Health surgeon removed part of Mark's pancreas, bile duct, gallbladder, lymph nodes, and small intestine. The surgical team at the UC Cancer Center performed the procedure successfully, and Mark was declared cancer-free. However, surgery was only the first step in his recovery journey.

Coping with Pain Signals: The Aftermath of Whipple Procedure

Mark's journey took a significant turn following the Whipple procedure. After the complex operation, Mark dealt with chronic pain in his abdominal region. This severe pain was no surprise, as pain signals are often amplified after such surgeries, affecting the patient's quality of life. Though the surgery successfully treated his cancer, Mark experienced prolonged stomach pain due to complications such as infection and a hernia after surgery. This lack of pain control affected his physical and emotional well-being, leading to a challenging period of depression and discomfort.

Daily painkillers and muscle relaxers became Mark's constant companions, providing some pain relief but also giving rise to complications like constipation and nausea. The frequent bowel movements and stomach acid fluctuations added to his discomfort, making each day a struggle. Despite the relief from cancer, Mark's body was still fighting.

Mark says, "I just wanted to get off of the medicines and get on with my life. The pain was just not allowing me to do it."

Multidisciplinary Care: A Leap Towards Chronic Pain Relief

In search of relief, Mark and his wife, Marianne, sought guidance from the University of Cincinnati Cancer Center UC Health's survivorship program. They received recommendations for drug-free pain management, including dietary changes, acupuncture, and therapy. Mark's pain management became a focal point of their discussions, leading to a personalized diet plan.

Acupuncture for Digestive Pain

Help came unexpectedly when Mark was referred to Angela Lai—a licensed acupuncturist at the Osher Center for Integrative Health at the University of Cincinnati. Angela's expertise extends beyond acupuncture to include Chinese medicine and internal medicine, allowing her to adopt a multidisciplinary approach to Mark's care. She introduced Mark to a personalized diet plan to help his digestive system recover and function more efficiently.

Mark's wife, Marianne, says, "I really believe that that was the day that his healing began."

Long-Term Diet After Whipple Procedure

Angela's recommended diet included small, frequent meals rich in pancreatic enzymes essential for digestion. Fat-soluble vitamins and solid foods were gradually reintroduced, ensuring that Mark's weight loss was controlled and his blood sugar levels were maintained. Alcoholic beverages, which could exacerbate abdominal pain, were excluded.

Mark and Marianne discovered that a healthy diet was crucial in managing Mark's stomach pain. The dietary guidelines included avoiding dairy, refined sugar, processed foods, fried foods, pork, and certain vegetables. While Mark occasionally deviated from the strict guidelines, he made a concerted effort to adhere as closely as possible.

Following the dietary recommendations, Mark began to experience relief from his stomach pain almost immediately. Combining acupuncture, therapy, and the survivorship program's holistic approach helped him regain control over his well-being. Mark's reliance on pain medication, like Tylenol and oxycodone, lessened as he found solace in the positive changes brought about by nutrition and alternative therapies.

General Dietary Guidelines for Post-Whipple Procedure Patients

Every patient and diagnosis is unique, requiring custom health guidance from their doctor and a registered dietitian. However, in general, patients should adhere to the following food and nutrients guidelines to help restore function to the digestive tract after Whipple surgery:

- **Avoid fried, greasy and fatty foods.** Choose baked, broiled, or grilled foods instead.
- **Consume nutrient-dense foods,** such as fruits, vegetables, lean protein, and whole grains, that contain protein, complex carbohydrates, healthy fat, vitamins, and minerals the body needs to function and heal.
- **Don't consume dairy.** No milk, cheese, butter, sour cream, cream cheese, or ice cream.
- **Eat small, frequent meals.** Try to eat something every 2-3 hours.
- **Drink plenty of fluids,** including clear liquids like water. Avoid all alcoholic beverages.
- **Take small sips with meals** to avoid excessive bloating, gas, or feeling too full to eat.

Proper food and nutrition can help patients facing chronic pain to minimize health risks, cope with nausea, and experience less pain naturally—limiting the need for high-prescription medications. With time, a healthy regimen can diminish side effects and the amount of pain that patients suffer.

Rediscovering Life Beyond Pain

With acupuncture care and adherence to his new meal plan, Mark experienced significant pain reduction within just two weeks. The need for daily painkillers diminished, and he was able to stop the medications completely—which was a significant step in his recovery. He was no longer overcome with daily pain and instead started to feel more like his old self. His therapy was working, and he was finally able to enjoy life with his wife, children, and grandkids again.

From being a cancer patient to leading a pain-free life post-Whipple procedure, Mark's journey is a testament to the power of a healthy lifestyle and its role in managing post-operative pain and enhancing overall well-being. By incorporating these changes into his daily life, Mark discovered a new lease on life.

beyond pain. His journey serves as an inspiration for others navigating the complexities of cancer survivorship, reminding them that hope and relief are waiting to be found.

Find unparalleled Survivorship and Supportive services at the University of Cincinnati Cancer Center

Mark's experience highlights the importance of personalized care, exploring alternative treatments, and the transformative potential of a healthy long-term diet. As we continue to learn more about the relationship between diet and cancer, Mark's story serves as a beacon of hope, guiding us toward a future where pain management and improved quality of life are attainable goals for all.

At UC Cancer Center, we understand each cancer patient faces unique challenges. We strive to enhance patients' quality of life and wellness through personalized care and integrative medicine. Many oncology patients and survivors, like Mark, face significant side effects following surgery that require custom care plans and support services beyond medications.

"We saw the survivorship service team, and it has changed everything," says Mark's wife, Marianne.

From diagnosis onward, our Survivorship and Supportive Services team provides evidence-based interventions, disease surveillance, healthy lifestyle promotion, support, therapy, and resources for patients and their loved ones.

Patients and care partners work closely with our providers throughout this program to create individualized plans based on their cancer treatment and current medical concerns. Our services range from counseling and emotional support, exercise wellness, nutritional guidance, and integrative medicine to medication management of treatment-related issues.

For more information, contact the Survivorship and Supportive Services patient navigator at 513-584-6997.