



Russ P.

Chapter 10

Surviving Esophageal Cancer

by Russ P.

My name is (Russell) Russ P. I am married and have two sons. I am 55 years old. My story begins roughly 35 years ago. I can remember when I was in my 20's having mild heartburn. I would sometimes wake up choking or gasping for air. I tolerated this ailment for many years. For heartburn I just chewed antacids and this relieved it until the next time.

On a company golf trip in 1996, my hotel roommate, a co-worker, asked me the following morning if I realized that I was snoring really bad and at times was gasping for air. I did not realize this and went for a sleep study in 1997. I was diagnosed with obstructive sleep apnea. The CPAP machine, which I still use today, has prevented heart disease and other life threatening diseases.

Fast forward twelve years to September, 2009. After so many years of ignoring GERD and heartburn, the effects this took on my esophagus were about to be discovered. I was on vacation and during lunch one day I was having a hard time swallowing my lunch. This was a strange feeling and during my colonoscopy consultation, I told the Gastroenterologist about my swallowing problem. He said that we should have an EGD scope performed.

During this exam the doctor found that seven percent of my esophagus was blocked by a mass. He did a biopsy. I received a call about a week later and found out that the mass was cancerous. The shock of that news was so devastating.

After the initial shock, I started to do research on the cancer. The initial consultation with the Henry Ford Hospital oncologist started the process. I started a journal and did more research. The recommended protocol for this type of cancer is chemotherapy, radiation and surgery. After a few weeks, the oncologist wanted me

to talk with three surgeons. I made three consultation appointments with the surgeons. After consulting with the University of Michigan Radiation Oncology, Oncology, and Dr. Mark Orringer, I decided that I would have all three procedures done at U-M.

In November of 2009 I started my chemo and radiation treatments. The radiation was done two times per day for four weeks. Chemo was done for three weeks and I was not able to have the last chemo treatment because of a low white blood cell count. My chemo and radiation treatments were completed and during the CT scan it was determined that I had two small pulmonary embolisms. I never had any symptoms and was instructed to go to my primary care physician immediately to get blood thinners. This delayed my surgery as the doctors had to be sure I was healthy enough for the surgery.

The date was now set. I would have my surgery on March 10, 2010. I walked three miles a day and used my Spirometer to get my lungs prepared. Dr. Mark Orringer was my surgeon. During the surgery, Dr. Orringer had a hard time freeing up the tumor, but he persisted. The esophagus was removed and I spent the next seven days in the hospital. My recovery was very good. The pathology results showed all cancer was removed. What great news!

Today, I am a cancer survivor and am very grateful for the nurses, doctors, and the entire staff at the University of Michigan hospital. They truly saved my life. The many prayers from family and friends sure helped and for that I am grateful, as well.

My quality of life is very good and I am leading a normal life. I did lose about 40 pounds during treatments and surgery, but my weight has leveled off now and I am eating normally. This 'New Normal' means eating smaller meals more frequently.

Cancer can be beat! Think positive! I did!