

New Treatment, New Hope For Liver-Cancer Patient

XENIA, Ohio - The worst moment in Doug Yaus' ordeal might have been the diagnosis of pancreatic cancer two years ago. As he sat on the doctor's examining table, the words made him light-headed. He had done enough research by then. "You're history," was what he heard, although the doctor didn't say quite that.

"That and the exploratory surgery," the 44-year-old Xenia man says now. "Those were scary."

The exploratory surgery could have ended his chance for a life-saving liver transplant. It turned out that cancer in the bile duct, the kind he really had, didn't offer much better prospects than cancer in the pancreas. But Yaus beat those long odds by qualifying for a clinical trial that might cure it. The catch was, if so much as one tiny tumor migrated from his liver, Yaus was out of the trial.

So after getting zapped with radiation for about two weeks, after nearly another week of radiation through a tube that snaked down his throat all the way to his liver, after some low-dose chemotherapy and 2 1/2 months of thinking he might actually be the one in 100 to beat this disease, it would all come down to what the surgeon found inside Yaus' abdomen.

And you thought it was hard to wait for an exam grade or the bid on the sale of your house? "That was intense," Yaus says. "You know you might find out that not too far down the road, you're going to meet your maker."

For 42 percent of the patients in the Mayo Clinic trial, the hope ended there. The cancer went beyond their livers and they went off the transplant list. But Yaus and 10 others in the experimental protocol received transplants and they're all alive today. It has been only a year for Yaus, but the average survival span is 44 months.

Where most cancer treatments attack the tumor after surgery, Dr. Gregory Gores decided to zap the bile-duct tumors before surgery. It appears to work "for a highly selected group of patients" with early-stage cancer, says Gores, who published his research in this month's issue of the Liver Transplantation journal. "Before this point, no treatment options were available for this group of patients."

As it happened, the misdiagnosis of pancreatic cancer was the first step Yaus took toward medical history. He wasn't even in any pain when he first went to his doctor. The whites of his eyes were kind of yellow, his urine looked more like coffee and some heartburn was wrecking his appetite, but he was still working eight-hour days.