



Life Stories

Liver transplant recipients share
their extraordinary stories

University Hospital

Health Alliance™

Liver Transplant Program

UNIVERSITY OF
UC
Cincinnati



*Every cloud has a silver lining.
A liver transplant could be yours.*

The Liver Transplant Program at The University Hospital in Cincinnati, Ohio, began in 1986 under the direction of J. Wesley Alexander, M.D., and Israel Penn, M.D., and is currently the largest liver transplant program in the state of Ohio and one of the top 20 programs in the U.S. in volume. Our waiting list for liver transplant is also one of the shortest in the country. Our goal is to help you return to a healthy life and your family quicker.

Because of its long history, this academic program attracts physicians who are involved in research and have years of experience, resulting in advanced transplant treatments. One-year patient survivals exceed 90 percent following liver replacement.

The Liver Transplant Program at The University Hospital is part of the Transplant Center at The University Hospital, a comprehensive adult, solid organ transplant center that also provides kidney, simultaneous kidney/pancreas and heart transplantation.

For more information, please call 513-584-9999 or toll free 1-888-UCLIVER.

Living through Extraordinary Circumstances

Lt. Pham Khiem was a pilot in the Vietnamese Air Force, flying transport aircraft when the North Vietnamese military invaded South Vietnam. On one of his final resupply missions, refugees stormed the plane trying to get out of the city of Danang before it was lost to the North. Mr. Khiem unloaded his cargo and flew 350 people to safety in Saigon. Mr. Khiem's family was living in Saigon at the time. "That flight and the panic I saw got me thinking. I thought, 'If it ever looks like the same thing is going to happen in Saigon, I will take a C-130 and get my family out!'" Through extraordinary circumstances and his determination, he was able to fly his family and friends to safety, first to Singapore and finally to the United States.

As if that isn't a large enough obstacle, Pham became sick. He was experiencing a lot of pain. His doctors told him he had liver disease and needed a transplant. Mr. Khiem was on the waiting list for three months. "I was surprised that the organ was available so soon." Mr. Khiem was in the hospital for five days. Four days later he was back on his feet. "The best part about receiving the transplant is that I never feel any pain anymore and don't have to take any pain killers."



Seeing the "Speed" of Light

John Roberts was diagnosed with end stage liver disease due to hepatitis C infection and severe cirrhosis in 1991. He wasn't a candidate for interferon and was told that the only treatment was to have a liver transplant. John decided he didn't want to be listed for transplant.

A few years later, John became interested in NASCAR racing. At a race in Bristol, Tennessee, he was introduced to Raceway Ministry, a program that prays for the safety of the drivers. Then John and his wife, Linda, learned that a super-speedway was coming to Sparta, Kentucky, and started researching how to start a raceway ministry at the new Kentucky Speedway. Soon after, John became very ill. "My doctor told me that I needed to make a final decision about transplant because time was running out to get me on the waiting list." John decided to be listed. "While praying for direction, God touched my heart with the fact that if I didn't have the transplant, there would be no Raceway Ministry at Kentucky Speedway."

John was transplanted on Nov. 3, 1999. John has started a raceway ministry at the Kentucky Speedway, which now has 300 volunteers.



16 Years and Counting

Dale Merz needed a transplant to treat Primary Sclerosing Cholangitis. He had his colon removed in 1982 because of ulcerative colitis. He opted for an ileal pull-thru in 1984. It was during this surgery that the doctor discovered Dale's cirrhosis of the liver. Dale would need a liver transplant within the next 10 years. There were years of fatigue and yellow eyes. In 1988, Dale noticed the swelling of his abdomen. He had an outpatient appointment for ERCP. He had complications and spent the night in the medical ICU. In August 1988 Dale's name was put on the liver transplant list. Dale was concerned about how his wife, Mary Kay, and five children, Adrienne, Renee, Stacie and twins, Dale and Diana, would manage. Family and friends knew he was not well but didn't understand the seriousness of his condition.

The wait was short. Dale's surgery was 16 hours long. After the surgery, Dr. Israel Penn told Dale's wife that he was not out of the woods yet and there was a long road ahead. He experienced mild rejection after one week. Dale went through several more complications including CMV, Non-Hodgkins Lymphoma, internal bleeding and hematoma in his leg.

After spending 90 days in the hospital, Dale came home. He went back to work as a carpenter 10 months later. He's been with the same company for more than 28 years now. With few problems over the next sixteen years post-transplant, Dale will tell you it was all worth it. There is life after liver transplant. Four years after transplant, Dale became the proud father of another set of twins, Brian and Lisa.



Dale was the seventh liver transplant recipient at The University Hospital. He is the longest living liver transplant recipient from University Hospital. "It may not sound like the nicest title to have, but I don't want to give it up." Dale never forgets that he received the gift of life from a 19-year-old and has promised the donor family that he will take good care of this gift.

April Fool's

"As you know, you have a pager that you take everywhere you go when you're listed for a transplant. My husband, Ted, and I were running errands and we got the page. Believe it or not, it was April 1, 2003. We didn't know if it was for real or an April Fool's joke." Andrea Smith was diagnosed with Primary Sclerosing Cholangitis (PSC). She was listed on the transplant list for 18 days when she was called.

Having an organ transplant is a major medical procedure. "One of the things I enjoy is seeing people's faces when I tell them I had a transplant and their eyes get big and jaw drops. They are amazed you're up, walking around and feeling great."

Friends and family were happy, scared and excited about the news. "I had lots of help and support from my family, church and friends. I look at my transplant as a rebirth. One thing I learned—to let things that weren't of utmost importance take a back seat. I also felt like I wanted to do things in my life that I always wanted to do. I started back to school at Wright State University in January to become a teacher."



Finding New Life in Cincinnati

For nearly 25 years, Helal El Sewedy suffered from liver failure, and was treated by several world authorities in the study of liver diseases. Mr. El Sewedy traveled to Cincinnati, Ohio to be evaluated by Dr. Guy Neff, medical director of the liver transplant program at The University Hospital, for possible liver transplantation, bringing with him, family, friends in hopes of a new start in life.

As a young, hardworking businessman from Egypt, he suffered chronic liver disease acquired from childhood vaccinations. Unbeknownst to him, Mr. El Sewedy was to carry a virus that would eventually destroy his liver and rob him of a normal existence. Fighting back fatigue, Helal developed a technology company despite suffering the ill effects of chronic liver disease.

“My husband is a miracle from God, as he has suffered from cirrhosis and the many complications thereof for most of his adult life,” said Lala, his wife. He continued to lose muscle and energy yet was able to continue to create a company that maintained several hundred employees. Lala never left her husband’s side as they searched the world over for a cure to his disease.

The El Sewedys first visited a physician in London, England only to find that they couldn’t find anything wrong with him, so they returned to Egypt. Desperate and at times depressed, Helal and Lala pressed on and consulted the late Dr. Sheffner at New York’s Mt. Sinai Hospital to get a second opinion. A biopsy was performed and he was diagnosed with cirrhosis and referred for liver transplantation.

Helal was to be listed for a transplant. But at that time, transplants were a new procedure. With a 20 percent risk of death, Dr. Sheffner from Mt. Sinai would not transplant. “He’s too special to me to risk his life,” Dr. Sheffner told Lala. Helal was put on interferon. He began feeling better and the El Sewedy’s returned to Egypt. After Dr. Sheffner passed away, a family cousin in Cincinnati recommended that Helal come here for any future care.

Then one day in June 2004, Helal began throwing up blood. His family rushed him to the hospital. By the time they reached the hospital in Egypt, Helal had spit up an entire bucket of blood. The doctors stabilized him, but everyone knew he didn't have long to live. The family chartered a medical plane to Cincinnati. Dr. Neff and Dr. Steven Rudich, surgical director of the Liver Transplant Program at The University Hospital, met them at the airport and Helal and his family went directly to The University Hospital downtown. "He had never felt so sick, but the doctors at University Hospital gave him hope," said Lala.

Helal was still very sick in the hospital. "We all knew he was going to die," said Lala. "I looked up to heaven and prayed to God to save my husband." Dr. Neff called in the morning and told us there was a liver for Helal. "We were very excited and calm, although we knew the difficulty of the transplant procedure. We told Helal that he still had a business appointment to keep. He smiled and asked, 'Did they find my liver?'" The surgery went smoothly. It's been four months and Helal is feeling much better and is on his road to recovery. "He's already begun walking up stairs and continues to build muscle in hopes of recovering the many years of his life that he was cheated out of due to chronic liver disease."



“I Was So Lucky To Have Such Support.”

Sharon began feeling very tired. She blamed the fatigue on her age—turning 40 and raising two teenagers who were active in school and sports. “When I became very fatigued, our family doctor referred me to an internist. He diagnosed the hepatitis and he took weekly blood levels until I went into a hepatic coma on my husband’s birthday, Feb. 6, 1989.”

The liver came from a man who was small in stature. “I remember them measuring to see if my mid-section could accommodate his liver. I began to cry knowing I was going to live because someone died. My doctor told me, ‘Sharon, we don’t know the donor, we are all very grateful to his family, but we don’t know him. We all care about you. You would have died without this transplant. We are happy because we now have the opportunity to save your life.’”

Sharon’s two sons and husband, Don, were at the hospital every day. “My son John even brought his prom date and a few of his friends on prom night so I could see them all dressed. The boys were very scared. My sons’ friends said they cried a lot, afraid they might lose me. My husband took a leave of absence from work so he could be with me all day—he questioned everything anyone did, from the nurses to the doctors and kept track of my numbers. I was so lucky to have such support.”

Sharon walked a mile daily (eight times around the sixth floor of University Hospital) for the last month she was hospitalized. “When I went home I was weak, but I walked every day. I returned to work in two months. I felt improvement every day, but didn’t feel strong again for a year.”

Sharon is currently the executive secretary of financial services at The University Hospital.

“I have enjoyed meeting many new people because of this experience. Our Tri-State Liver Transplant Support Group is important to me. I enjoy connecting with other transplant recipients and sharing experiences. Many of them have become close friends.”



Support Groups

As you have heard from these stories, there is life after liver transplant, but the path is not an easy one. There are several local support groups available to help you and your family through this journey.

The Tri-State Liver Transplant Support Group

The Tri-State Liver Transplant Support Group provides support and information to liver transplant patients, including transplant recipients and those waiting for a transplant, and their families. The group also promotes organ donation.

Meetings are the first Monday of even months (Feb., April, etc.) at The University Hospital at 6:30 p.m.

Contact Information

Tri-State Liver Transplant Support Group Center
2925 Vernon Place, Suite 300
Cincinnati, Ohio 45219-2430
Voice mail: 513-558-3286

Change of Heart Support Group

All types of transplant patients and family members are also welcome to join the Change of Heart Support Group. The Change of Heart Support Group helps provide support and encouragement to transplant recipients and heart failure candidates awaiting transplants and their families through prayer, volunteer service, heart failure and transplant education, social activities and financial aid. For a schedule of upcoming meetings and more information, visit www.changeofheartsupport.com.

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