Doing Great Today...After Years of Pain

My quality of life was pretty nonexistent," recalls Vincent Stabile, 54, of Bermuda Dunes, referring to the excruciating back pain he endured as the result of degenerative disk disease. Although he'd undergone a laminectomy at age 38 to take pressure off his spinal nerves, by the time he was 52 his spine had deteriorated further.

"I'd run the gauntlet of treatments, starting with physical therapy and stretching," he says."I even tried epidurals [steroid injections]. But, it became apparent that it was a matter of when, not if, I was looking at another surgery because I had exhausted all other avenues."

After an initial surgical consultation which he characterized as "all doom and gloom," Stabile asked his insurance company for a second opinion from a neurosurgeon. That's when he went to see Alfred C. Shen,MD. Impressed by Dr. Shen's expertise and cautious optimism, Stabile agreed to undergo spinal surgery in August 2008. (See Sidebar)

"I spent only two-and-a-half days in the hospital, was back to light duty at work in six weeks, and in 11 months was water skiing on the Colorado River," says Stabile.

Today, Stabile is back to regular duty as a service worker for Southern California Gas Company. It's a physically demanding job that has him in and out of his truck dozens of times a day, crawling through attics, climbing onto roofs and kneeling to check appliances. The self-described Type A personality also keeps busy at home, washing his own car and doing his own pool cleaning and landscaping.

"I don't like to sit still," he says."And staying active helps me feel good."

"I'm doing great today," Stabile continues. "Sure, I have moments and even days [of discomfort], but it doesn't even come close to what I felt before surgery. Dr. Shen gave me back my life, and I can't thank him and his staff enough."

THE SURGERY

"When Mr. Stabile came to see us, he had severe pain in his back and down both legs," says Eisenhower Neurosurgeon Alfred C. Shen, MD. "We did some advanced diagnostic testing, including a SPECT/CT and discogram, and were able to pinpoint the three disks in his lumbar (lower back) spine that were causing the pain. Based on this finding, Mr. Stabile underwent a three-level discectomy and interbody fusion."

"First, we did a laminectomy, removing the lamina [layer of bone that covers the spinal cord and nerves] of each diseased vertebra to decompress the nerves and provide access to the diseased disk," explains Dr. Shen. Next, Dr. Shen performed a discectomy on the three problem disks. This involves removing the herniated portion of the disk to provide additional decompression of the nerves.

"We saved the removed lamina and recycled them by putting them back in the disk spaces where we removed the diseased disks," Dr. Shen continues. "We also put in a small spacer to maintain the patient's disk height. This also lays the seeds for fusion to occur — the body knits its own bone inside the disk space." Spinal fusion permanently connects two or more adjacent vertebrae in the spine, adding stability and also helping to relieve pain. In Stabile's case, three vertebrae were fused.

Mr. Stabile was an active participant in his own care and recovery. "Mr. Stabile did exceptionally well because he was tremendously motivated to get back to a normal life," Dr. Shen adds. "He listened to my recommendations and followed through with everything post-operatively."

Healthy Living is a publication of Eisenhower Medical Center · © Copyright 2015 All Rights Reserved · www.emc.org