From Adventure to Adversity: Facing Extensive-Stage Lung Cancer

Vickie, 76, lives in Atlantic Beach, Florida. She aims to make the most of each day and stay active as she lives with extensive-stage small cell lung cancer (ES-SCLC).

November 1, 2024 Sponsored By Amgen

Until I was diagnosed with lung cancer, I couldn't imagine that anything was seriously wrong with me.

Two years before receiving the news, I would sometimes get intense chest pains. Despite numerous X-rays, hospital visits and even a cardiac catheterization to test my heart, doctors assured me I was healthy. I didn't question it further as I was so focused on my husband, Larry's, health. I stayed very active and dismissed the pain, never considering that it could be related to a serious health condition.

In the summer of 2022, Larry and I vacationed in Michigan, with me spending hours paddle boarding, kayaking, and hiking. One morning, I woke up and was struggling to breathe. I couldn't take three steps without pain. At the nearby hospital, the doctor insisted on a CT scan, which revealed a large tumor in my left lung.

I was in shock, thinking we should have caught this earlier. I remember feeling so mentally numb as I asked, "Okay - where do we go from here?"

A biopsy of the tumor confirmed that it was small cell lung cancer, or SCLC. I didn't understand what that meant at first, but my doctor and care team explained that SCLC is a fast-growing and aggressive type of lung cancer.[1]

As a former teacher, I appreciated how my doctor explained SCLC and provided guidance as we navigated treatment. When I was teaching, I always loved figuring out how to teach different students certain concepts because everyone learns differently. It can take a lot of patience, and I appreciate that my doctor took the time to make sure I understood my condition.

After my diagnosis, I quickly began radiation and chemotherapy. During that time, a friend and I would walk a mile a day together, which gave me a goal and helped me to stay active. It was a really difficult time and those walks were challenging, but I felt good about myself that I

accomplished them. My care team advised me that staying active could be good for me and those walks helped me through the most mentally challenging days.

I finished treatment, and it appeared to be successful. My doctor explained that while many people with SCLC may respond initially to treatment, relapse is possible.[1,2] A year later, I found out the cancer had metastasized when the doctors found a spot in my brain during a scan. This is also called “extensive stage” SCLC, or ES-SCLC, meaning the cancer has spread throughout one lung, both lungs or beyond the lungs to other parts of the body.[3]

I underwent Gamma Knife radio surgery, which is a computer-guided form of radiation that delivers beams of energy on cancerous lesions in the brain, and they were able to remove the tumor which was in the balance area of my brain.[4]

Of course, my first thought after that surgery was, “Can I still balance on my paddle board?” and I was happy to find I could still enjoy one of my favorite hobbies.

In early 2024, I started chemotherapy again, because doctors continued to find nodules in my left lung. I worry about other spots appearing, but I trust my current care team and the treatment plan we have in place. I think of it as a whack-a-mole game – each time a new spot shows up, we quickly treat it.

With this cancer, it would be easy to completely withdraw and pull into myself. I’ve made a conscious effort to stay active and connected with friends in my community and my family, who have been my greatest source of strength especially after my husband passed away earlier this year.

My husband was my rock. We were married for 55 years, and he taught me the true meaning of love and perseverance. Despite the occasional moments of frustration, our love always saw us through. I’m blessed to be very close with our children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews, who have been my pillars of support. My daughter visits every weekend, and my son flies in from Texas for my treatments. My 14-year-old grandson writes me the sweetest cards. I cherish the times when everyone visits. I especially enjoy my time in Michigan where we gather around evening bonfires, roasting marshmallows and sharing stories. Going through cancer has shown me the importance of a strong support system like my friends and family that I can lean on throughout this journey.

My advice is no matter how physically active and seemingly healthy one is; it is important to press for answers if you’re experiencing any unexplained symptoms and find out what is happening. Looking back, I wish I had spoken up and advocated for myself earlier and taken those chest pains as a serious warning sign. I didn’t know that an X-ray might not show lung cancer and that a CT scan was necessary for a more accurate picture.[5] I advocate for every woman over the age of 50 who has ever smoked to receive a low dose CT scan as part of their yearly well checkups.[6] Early detection has the potential to save lives![6]

I try to live in a bubble where I refuse to ruin this day with negative thoughts. I can make an appointment to deal with those thoughts and keep the feelings at bay until the appointment time when I can let my anger and frustrations out.

To anyone who just received a lung cancer diagnosis or is undergoing their own journey, I'd encourage them to embrace it and be as open-minded as possible. Try to find joy and contentment every single day. Hang on to the things that you love dearly, the people you love dearly. Find your community and hold them close.

To learn more about ES-SCLC and information on a treatment option, visit SCLC-and-Me.com.

This information reflects the experience of one individual patient, Vickie. The experience of other patients may vary.

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