Why Did Kathy Griffin Skip Painkillers After Painful Lung Cancer Surgery?

The comedian's history of addiction and suicidality factored into her approach to pain relief after lung cancer surgery.

August 23, 2021 By Caroline Tien

Early in the morning on August 2, comedian Kathy Griffin, 60, dropped a bombshell via a tweet that has since gone viral. In a statement addressed to her 2 million Twitter followers, she revealed that she had been diagnosed with Stage I lung cancer in her left lung and would soon be undergoing surgery to remove the malignant tumor. While Griffin's doctors were "optimistic" about her prognosis, she wrote, the surgery would involve the excision of half of the affected lung. As is the case with about 12% of people diagnosed with lung cancer, Griffin never smoked.

Following the operation, Griffin told People, she avoided taking narcotics to relieve post-op pain because she had attempted to kill herself by overdosing on prescription painkillers last summer.

Instead, she wrote, she was relying on Tylenol (acetaminophen). "With over a year clean and drug-free, I now know that I can do this and anything I want without those devil pills," she wrote, adding, "I fear drugs and addiction more than I fear cancer."

While opioids can be highly addictive, they are also the most effective means of mitigating severe cancer-related pain. Even people with a history of addiction can be safely prescribed opioids if carefully monitored by their medical team.

What's more, a growing number of non-opioid medications and therapies can provide relief with little or no addictive potential. (See "Managing Cancer Pain.") After Griffin tweeted about her postsurgical pain and her fear of painkillers, Jorge A. Caballero, MD, a clinical instructor in pain medicine at Stanford University, tweeted back: "Sending good vibes your way! Also, ask your care team about an intercostal nerve block to get you over the hump of the next few days w/o relying on opioid medications. It may not be an option for you, but it's worth asking about."

While Griffin avoided prescription painkillers voluntarily, others may find they are denied or under-prescribed painkillers. That, in turn, may send some people with cancer rushing to the emergency room for relief. In a recent study published in the Journal of Clinical Oncology, researchers at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute found that a decrease in prescriptions for opioids between 2007 and 2017 dovetailed with an increase in visits to the emergency room for cancer pain. Taken together,

their findings suggested that rules and regulations intended to restrict access to such powerful medications in the wake of the national opioid epidemic have inadvertently hurt those who actually need them.

Now several weeks into her recovery, Griffin seems to be feeling better. By August 6, according to her Twitter account, she had been discharged from the hospital and returned home, much to the delight of her pack of dogs. Later, she tweeted, “I don’t know how I would’ve survived a suicide attempt, drug addiction and cancer without our doggies. Cherish them.” She tweeted a video of her work regaining her speaking voice after surgery. Griffin also has positive career news: She’ll be appearing in season 5 of the HBO Max Comedy Search Party.

Her experience, she indicated in the statement, is a testament to the importance of preventive health care. “Please stay up to date on your medical checkups,” she wrote in her August 2 tweet. “It’ll save your life.”

For more on celebrities who recently revealed a cancer diagnosis, read “CNN Anchor Christiane Amanpour Announces Ovarian Cancer Diagnosis.” And to read about another comedian who took to Twitter to candidly discuss her experiences with medical care, read “Comedian’s Viral Twitter Rant Highlights Dangers of ‘Fatphobia’ and Cancer Stigma.” For more on cancer pain, see “When Cancer Pain Won’t Go Away.”

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