

Painful Symptoms Led to Discovery of Precancerous Pancreatic Cyst

Gary Weberg was operated on by Marco Del Chiaro, MD, PhD, who is leading a project to develop global guidelines for cystic neoplasms of the pancreas.

December 13, 2024 By Greg Glasgow at the University of Colorado Cancer Center

The last thing Gary Weberg wanted was another surgery.

But three years after he received an operation to remove cancerous lymph nodes in his neck, the Colorado Springs resident went under the knife again, in a surgery that saved him from developing pancreatic cancer.

An early warning sign

For Weberg, the ordeal began with multiple attacks of pancreatitis — inflammation of the pancreas that he describes as “the most painful thing I’ve ever had in my life.” His primary care doctor referred Weberg to a gastroenterologist, who ordered imaging and discovered a cyst on his pancreas.

The gastroenterologist then referred him to [Marco Del Chiaro](#), MD, PhD, professor of [surgery](#) and division chief of [surgical oncology](#) in the [University of Colorado Department of Surgery](#), and one of the country’s foremost experts on [pancreatic cancer](#).

“I went to see Dr. Del Chiaro, and he told me that we needed to do a biopsy,” says Weberg, 67. “He did a needle biopsy down my esophagus and through the stomach, and he said I had an IPMM (intraductal papillary mucinous neoplasm) cyst that was precancerous. He said, ‘I don’t know if it’s going to turn into cancer, but in my opinion, there’s a high likelihood that it will. I think we should go in and remove that cyst.’ And I was like, ‘You need to do what? Let me sleep on that.’”

Weberg, who in the course of his life has had multiple knee surgeries, back surgeries, a shoulder surgery, and multiple hand surgeries for carpal tunnel syndrome, was reluctant to return to the OR, but in the end, he was glad he did, because after Del Chiaro removed the cyst and sent it to pathology, he confirmed that it would probably have turned into pancreatic cancer within few months.

"I have two relatives that died from either bile duct or pancreas cancer. Dr. Del Chiaro saved my life."

Detecting and treating IPMMs

Del Chiaro, who is also a member of the [CU Cancer Center](#), notes that an IPMM rarely causes pancreatitis or other symptoms, as it did Weberg's case — most often the cysts are found incidentally during a scan for an unrelated concern.

"It's very important to be aware, because sometimes people will say, 'Oh, it's just a cyst.' But a normal cyst in the pancreas is very rare. IPMM is quite common, and they can potentially evolve into cancer," says Del Chiaro, who is leading an initiative to create global guidelines for these type of lesions, involving experts from across the world. "The majority don't, but in his case, he had some concerning aspect of those cysts, and that's why we decided to intervene."

Weberg and other patients with IPMMs also benefit from the fact that the CU Cancer Center and UCHHealth University of Colorado Hospital are home to a dedicated [Pancreas Cyst Multidisciplinary Clinic](#) in which experts from multiple medical specialties evaluate pancreatic cysts, determine their potential for becoming cancerous, and set a course for treatment.

Life after IPMM surgery

If Weberg was fortunate that his precancerous cyst was discovered and removed early, he was just as fortunate after his recovery. Del Chiaro removed part of his pancreas as well as his spleen, which in often requires enzyme tablets — and can even cause diabetes.

Weberg suffered none of those aftereffects, however, and he is now cancer free, with plenty of time to help his neighbors rebuild after the Black Forest Fire of 2013 and to restore a vintage 1960s red GTO in honor of his son, who died of blood cancer three years ago.

"It was James' dream to buy a stacked headlight GTO from 1965 or '66 — he always wanted a red one — and we going to do it together as a father-son project," Weberg says. "Then he got cancer. So I found a red one and I bought it, and I'm in the middle of restoring the engine. I got a license plate on it that's his initials and my initials together."

During November, which is Pancreatic Cancer Awareness Month, Weberg offered advice for others who might be in the situation he was in prior to his surgery.

"If you get pancreatitis, especially more than once, you really need to make sure there's nothing else going on," he says. "IPMM cysts are not the only thing that can cause pancreatitis, but you should not ignore more than one case of pancreatitis."

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<http://beta.docker.cancerhealth.com/article/painful-symptoms-led-discovery-precancerous-pancreatic-cyst>