

Joan's Story – Lung Cancer

For Joan, a 66-year-old resident of Waldorf, Md., a colonoscopy was the secret to an early diagnosis of lung cancer.

Joan's doctor saw something suspicious during a routine colonoscopy in June 2004 and recommended a CT scan to rule out potential problems. During this appointment, Joan's husband Bob mentioned that she often coughed very hard. Bob was concerned that, perhaps, Joan was suffering from more than just chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), which she was diagnosed with the year before after many years of smoking.



The doctor agreed and ordered a CT scan for her upper body as well. The results were not good. The CT scan showed a spot on each lung – Joan had cancer.

In August 2004, Joan was referred to the Lombardi Comprehensive Cancer Center at Georgetown University Hospital, where she met with a team of surgeons, oncologists and pulmonologists. They gave her grim news. If the spots on each lung were the same type of cancer, it was a sure sign that the cancer had spread throughout her body and it was not a good prognosis. "But if they were different types of tumors, then I would have a better chance of survival," Joan said.

After getting biopsies on both lungs, the doctors diagnosed Joan with synchronous bilateral stage 1A non-small cell lung cancer. However, the good news was that the two tumors were distinct cancers. This diagnosis meant that there was less likelihood that it had metastasized, and doctors were hopeful they could successfully treat each tumor.

Joan and her doctors decided that surgery would be the best first course of action. In October 2004, Joan had the surgery, during which doctors removed the tumor along with the lower lobe of her right lung.

"The recovery from surgery is terrible," Joan recalled. "You're in a lot of pain and though I healed quickly, it still took about six weeks until I could go help Bob in the office" at the self storage business they operate. "The side effects still linger two-and-a-half years later", she added. She has difficulty breathing because she is missing part of her right lung and she has strange sensations in her nerve endings around the series of two-inch scars that dot her back and side.

After her surgery, Joan started chemotherapy in an attempt to shrink the tumor in her left lung and attack any cancerous cells that may have spread to other parts of her body. She received four treatments, but experienced allergic reactions during each chemotherapy session..

"I couldn't have a second surgery to remove the tumor in my left lung because my lifestyle would have changed drastically," said Joan. If surgery was her only option, Joan would not have been able to breathe normally and would have faced a life in which she was tethered constantly to an oxygen tank.

Joan didn't want to be slowed down by such a radical change. She still wanted to be able to take long walks, shop and restore antiques, continuing working at her job at a self storage business and visit her daughter Tracy and granddaughter Maly in Louisiana.

To help Joan maintain her quality of life, her doctors decided to use a new technology, the CyberKnife System, to treat the second tumor. The CyberKnife System would allow doctors to

irradiate the tumor in her left lung using precise doses of radiation. No surgery would be needed, and Joan would not experience the same terrible side effects she had during chemotherapy. In fact, the doctors said Joan could go back to work in the office with Bob immediately following each procedure.

In February 2005, Joan underwent her CyberKnife treatments over the course of three days. During each procedure – which took about two hours each – she laid on a treatment couch wearing a specially made vest that helps pinpoint the tumor as her lungs move with respiration. “I just went in, lay down and slept,” she said. “It didn’t change anything about how I was feeling. It didn’t hurt and it didn’t take my breath away. It was just like I rested for a couple hours – almost like a spa day.”

“The treatment was so easy and let me get right back to life as usual – I wish the CyberKnife could have been my option from the start,” Joan noted. “And I wish this would work for everyone who has lung cancer.”

Despite being cancer free, Joan still has limitations from her first surgery. “I still can do what I was doing prior to my lung cancer diagnosis, but now I have to slow myself down because breathing can be difficult because of my COPD and the missing lobe in my right lung,” she said. “But had it not been for the CyberKnife, I would surely be carrying around an oxygen tank.”

Joan is thankful that a routine check-up allowed doctors to catch her lung cancer before it had the chance to spread. “And I was fortunate to be close to Georgetown, where they had the CyberKnife and an incredible team of doctors,” she said. “The CyberKnife works. I urge anyone who has ever smoked to get a CT scan. That way they can catch lung cancer early and improve their chances of survival.”