

Using Immunotherapy as a Cancer Treatment

Walter Hawkins and his wife, Paulina, enjoy long, brisk walks.

Three times each week. And that is part of my routine.

But a few years ago, Walter started having some symptoms that stopped him in his tracks.

It was a tight 'band' that seemed to press around my abdomen, and I could feel it around my body. I had a series of tests and that confirmed that I was positive Stage 4 lung cancer.

When he was diagnosed, the cancer had already spread – to his spine. Walter became dependent on a wheelchair – and says he was told he may never walk again.

His treatment consisted of radiation, followed by the maximum amount of chemotherapy that could be given.

Walter's cancer started to shrink. But he needed more treatment. He and his care team had to find something different. And they did.

There was a new medicine that had just been authorized out of clinical trial. And I was started on that medicine.

That 'New Medicine' is part of an approach to fighting cancer called "Immunotherapy."

It works by using your own immune system, which defends the body against substances that can make you sick.

Just as your immune system learns to fight viruses from vaccines you receive, these new cancer fighting medications boost your immune system and white blood cells, and can target the cancer cells directly. This helps limit the damage caused by the cancer cells and its spread.

It is considered biologic therapy, and for many, can be used with chemotherapy, surgery, or radiation.

Immunotherapy is very exciting. It's just a whole new way of treating cancer that we haven't had before.

There are several types of Immunotherapies, and they've been proven to increase survival for people with certain cancers.

This is really a game-changer. These patients really have no other recourse, and so it's really flipping cancer therapy on its end.

And I'm going to need to get to your port.

Immunotherapy is given most commonly through an IV – the way Walter receives his treatment. It may also be delivered through quick injections, topically on the skin, or in pill form.

The most common side effects are flu-like symptoms, such as a fever or muscle aches, and reactions at the infusion site, like soreness, redness, and swelling.

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But sometimes immunotherapy can lead to severe side effects. Immunotherapy can cause your immune system to attack healthy cells.

These reactions can affect your lungs, liver, thyroid, and digestive system leading to colitis and pancreatitis.

Low blood pressure, low oxygen, kidney dysfunction. Patients can get very, very sick.

Your healthcare team will watch very closely for any severe side effects.

If they see signs of any, they may prescribe drugs that 'calm down' your immune system or stop treatment, at least temporarily. Fortunately, Walter hasn't had any severe effects.

Are you having any difficulty with your eating?

And the treatment, which he started two years ago, continues to work.

I'm so happy to report that everything looks completely stable on your scans. The immunotherapy is still controlling the cancer.

Yes.

Walter has gone from being in a wheelchair to six-mile walks with Paulina.

Sometimes, he even jogs part of it, racing ahead of her. Thanks to his treatment, Walter is once again looking at the road ahead.

I wanna live to see my grandbabies grow. I wanna live.