

"I Never Thought It Could Be This Good"

Living Pain Free After A Back Injury



BOB NIBECKER IS A TOUGH GUY. A former Marine who served in Iraq, he's also a retired police officer who was run over by no fewer than four drunk drivers during his 25 years of duty. Further, in 1992, while piloting a Riverside County Sheriff's Department helicopter, he survived when the chopper's tail rotor malfunctioned and the aircraft spun out of control 250 feet in the air, crashing into and rolling down a rocky mountainside.

"I figure I've used about eight and a half of my nine lives," quips the 54-year-old Yucca Valley resident. While Bob was extraordinarily lucky to get out of the helicopter crash alive, he did sustain some serious injuries, including broken ribs and herniated disks in his spine. "But I mended enough to go back to work, and I kept working as a police street officer," he relates. "I could still run, and moving helped more than being inactive. But, my back kept getting worse. I spent a lot of time lying on the floor with my feet up, trying to get some relief."

"On a pain scale of one to ten, a good day was a three," Nibecker says. "On my worst days, I'd be at an eight and immobile. But, I resisted the idea of surgery because everyone I ever talked to said, 'Don't do it. You'll just get worse. Few people have a good outcome.' So I tolerated the pain...and I have a real high pain tolerance."

By mid-2009, however, the pain was so constant that Bob realized he needed to take action. He went to see Stephen Steele, DO, an Eisenhower Osteopath with fellowship training in sports medicine. "Dr. Steele ordered an MRI of my spine, and called me a day and a half later," Bob recalls. "He said, 'You win the bad-back-of-the-month club. The radiologist and I looked at your scans and your back is bad.'" Dr. Steele referred Bob to Farhad M. Limonadi, MD, Director of Neurological Surgery at the Eisenhower Neuroscience Institute.

His consult with Dr. Limonadi took place on October 16, 2009. "I was impressed," Bob says. "He's a neurosurgeon with an incredible schedule, but when you're in his office, it's like you're the only guy in the world."

"Dr. Limonadi said there was no reason for me to be in this much pain, and that he could schedule surgery in a few weeks," Bob continues. "But, he said if I started to feel any leg numbness or tingling in the meantime, to get to the ER right away because it meant nerve damage."

Just 48 hours later, Bob woke up on Sunday morning and fell getting out of bed. "The pain was at a 10," Nibecker says. "I'd lost all feeling in my left leg, and my right was going fast. I couldn't get off of the floor, so I did a low crawl to the car, and my wife drove me to Eisenhower. They wheeled me in and put me on painkillers to help me bear the pain. I had no feeling from the waist down." When Dr. Limonadi arrived at the hospital, Bob consented to surgery, a procedure called a lumbar microdiscectomy.

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—Bob Nibecker

The procedure Dr. Limonadi performed — also known as microdecompression spine surgery — includes removal of a small portion of the bone over the nerve root and/or disk material from under the nerve root to relieve neural impingement and provide more room for the nerve to heal. "Microdiscectomy involves making a small incision in the lower back, and using the surgical microscope, exposing the spinal canal and the herniated disk material, followed by carefully removing the herniated fragments," explains Dr. Limonadi.

"The spinal canal typically is filled with nerve roots," continues Dr. Limonadi. "Their job is to command different body parts, and the lower lumbar spine controls the legs and transmits pain sensation. Mr. Nibecker's large herniated disks extended into the spinal canal and into the space of the nerves. He had all the signs and symptoms of nerve impingement. So, we did a minimally invasive microdiscectomy with the surgical microscope and took out the fragments."

"When I woke up in recovery, I could wiggle my toes and feet, and there was no pain," Bob says. "It was like 'Woohoo, a miracle!'" After a one-week hospital stay, Bob returned home. After 90 days, he was cleared to go back to work — as a helicopter pilot. He flies for an air ambulance service that provides medical evacuation for the Marine base at Twentynine Palms.

"My toes tingled for a while after surgery, and I had some occasional shooting pains, but Dr. Limonadi explained that it's normal from the nerve damage, and it might take about two years to resolve," says Nibecker. "He also told me that I might not ever be completely pain free. But, I'm back to nearly 100 percent — it's as if it never happened. I don't even think about my back anymore. Before, because of the pain, I could never not think about it."

"Now, I can move and do things again," shares Nibecker, noting that he takes care to practice good body mechanics when doing things such as lifting. "I can't believe I put up with the pain for so long. I never thought it could be this good. Dr. Limonadi is my hero."

"Mr. Nibecker is a strong gentleman," says Dr. Limonadi thoughtfully. "He lived with pain for a long time, but managed to function and maintain his muscle strength, and didn't give in to narcotics to manage his pain. He should be his own hero. He was ready for recovery. I just gave him a hand, and he pulled himself up."