

Resilience and Determination

Battling Back from a Brain Tumor

It was a Sunday night and 61 year old Pattie Hill was fast asleep. "My fist was balled up and I was shaking," she says. "My husband pushed me and asked if I was awake. I could hear him but answered in a garbled tone." Frightened, Pattie's husband sat her up on the side of the bed and asked if she wanted to go to the hospital. She dismissed him and said she was fine.

The next day, Pattie ran her errands without incident, and on Tuesday went to Disneyland with her daughter and grandson. "I felt absolutely fine, but before I met my daughter and grandson, I had a blood test for another condition," explains Pattie. "While I was there, I told the nurses what happened and they encouraged me to see my doctor."

On the following day, Pattie met with her doctor. After a few tests, he scheduled an MRI for that afternoon.

Following the MRI, Pattie's physician met with her immediately. She recalls, "He said, 'You have a tumor the size of a tennis ball and you need to go to the hospital now.'"

"I called my husband and told him that I had a brain tumor," Pattie says tearfully. "He was a nervous wreck." That evening, she was admitted to Eisenhower Medical Center where she was seen by Shahin Etebar, MD, Medical Director, Eisenhower Neuroscience Institute. Dr. Etebar assured her she could go home, and both she and her husband could come to his office on Monday to discuss her options.

When Pattie and her husband met with Dr. Etebar, he explained that what Pattie had experienced the previous Sunday night was a seizure and the tumor she had was a meningioma, one of the most common brain tumors to affect women age 50 and older. "Meningiomas are generally benign in the sense that they don't metastasize and go elsewhere," says Dr. Etebar. "However, they can be aggressive and grow to rather large sizes and develop pressure around surrounding structures. Ninety percent of meningiomas occur in the cranium and are caused by a genetic error in the cells."

Pattie was told that her scheduled surgery could last between eight and 17 hours. Dr. Etebar also told Pattie she would probably require oxygen for two or three days following the operation.

Pattie's surgery was completed in six hours and she was off oxygen within a day, able to walk after surgery, and she breezed through physical therapy. Her entire hospital stay was only 36 hours.

According to Dr. Etebar, Pattie's excellent recovery had to do with Pattie. "She is a very motivated individual and she was motivated to get back to normal life as soon as possible."

Through it all Pattie remembers having a lot of support and praying. "I think that's what did it," she smiles, choking back tears. "That, and Dr. Etebar."

Meningioma The Most Common Brain Tumor

Meningioma, a slow growing tumor, is quite common, especially in women over 50. Generally benign in nature and aggressive, they grow to large sizes (as large as a grapefruit) and put pressure on the surrounding area. Ninety percent develop in the cranium, while 10 percent occur in the spine.

Symptoms include memory and judgment problems. Some patients develop psychiatric issues, compulsive behavior, or apathy and indifference. "If the tumor is sitting in a different part of the brain that is more sensitive, such as the area that controls motor movement, they tend to become symptomatic sooner," says Dr. Etebar. "If it is sitting in the spinal canal, which is small, it can cause spine, neck, back, arm or leg pain and in worst case scenarios, paralysis or profound weakness."

Meningiomas are usually operable if accessible and diagnosed early.