

Dialysis doesn't keep her down

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Despite her problem kidneys, Lauren Gregg doesn't let the need for dialysis hold her back.

An active person who has been playing professional pool since she was 18, Gregg not only is able to do her dialysis at home thanks to a setup from a Hamilton business, she can also take her act on the road.

When Gregg was 14, she was diagnosed with kidney disease. At the time, she was put on blood pressure medication, which helped for more than a decade to keep her kidneys functioning.

However, when she was 25, her creatinine levels rose at a rapid pace. Creatinine is a waste product that normally gets filtered through the kidneys, so a rise in creatinine indicates decreased kidney function. As a result, Gregg had to start dialysis.

Gregg explained that going to a center was a difficult experience emotionally.

"I would walk in a happy person, because I've always been a happy person. Once I was inside I would see patients lying down so sick—no limbs, arms, blind, just lying there lifeless. It saddened me, it really did sadden me," she said.

In addition to the environment, Gregg said that she never knew what you were going to get in terms of nurses. Some of the nurses were amazing, but some were horrible and had no bedside manner. However, most of all, in-center dialysis made it almost impossible for Gregg to lead a normal life. She had to be at the center every Monday, Wednesday and Friday at 1 p.m.

"It was a regiment," she said. "I couldn't be late. I couldn't be early. I couldn't travel. I couldn't really do anything."

For the past year, Gregg has been doing dialysis at home through Satellite Healthcare's WellBound center in Hamilton. Being able to do dialysis at home has completely changed her life. Even though she has to dialyze five days a week instead of three, her schedule is far less constricted.

"I can do it whenever I want. If I wake up and want to do it, I go ahead and do it at nine. If I wake up early I could do it later or not at all that day, as long as I do it five days a week," she said.

She has even done dialysis at 2 a.m. or 3 a.m. on occasion. In order to teach patients to do at home dialysis, WellBound offers a four-week course, although Gregg waited seven weeks to transition to at-home treatments to make sure she felt completely comfortable with the process. At first, she made some mistakes, but she had all the support she needed to work them out and at this point she rarely makes mistakes.

Marianne Romano, the nurse that works with Gregg at WellBound, said that there are many advantages of doing at home dialysis for patients. In addition to being more convenient, she said that at home dialysis patients are healthier because they dialyze more often, so there is less time for poisons to build up and harm other organs like the pancreas, liver, and heart.

Romano has been working at WellBound for six years. Prior to that, she worked at an in-center dialysis unit for 25 years.

Romano meets with Gregg once a month to go over bloodwork (which Gregg draws by herself at home) and reviews how treatment is going and if there are any problems. She also provides education at every meeting, discussing issues such as disaster preparedness, blood pressure, diabetes and infection.

"Lauren is a great person with an extremely positive attitude," she said. "She always has a smile on her face."

She added that Gregg is always willing to talk to new patients about at home dialysis and how it works.

Doing at-home dialysis has also allowed Gregg the freedom to travel. Once, when she was still doing in-center dialysis, she visited her father's house in New York City for Thanksgiving. She wanted to stay an extra day, and her dialysis center told her to go to the hospital to do her treatment. The experience was highly unpleasant.

"I was in the emergency room for about 10 hours," she said. "When I did the treatment, the room was small, and the doctor or nurse that did the sticking hurt me. It was really horrible. I decided never to do it again."

Traveling is far easier now, although it still takes more planning and effort than it would for most. Gregg needs to bring her 80-pound dialysis machine with her, which is kept in a 20-pound box. She also has to bring a large case filled with supplies including needles, gauze, tape and saline.

She also has to notify WellBound before traveling, so they can ship to her destination the cartridges of dialysate that clean the toxins from her blood. The process has allowed Gregg to go Las Vegas for 10 days to compete in the national American Poolplayers Association tournament.

Playing pool is one of Gregg's greatest joys in life. She started playing when she was 18. Her boyfriend at the time used to play, and at first she would just watch him. One day she decided that she wanted to play, too. She picked up a stick and got the eight ball in off the break, which is an automatic win. She has been playing ever since.

When she was 21, she started playing in a league. These days she plays once a week on a team based at Happy Hour Tavern in Levittown, Pennsylvania.

Gregg said she likes to have company when she is doing her treatments and between her older brother, who lives with her, and her younger brother, his wife and their two daughters, who lives next door, she almost always has someone around.

"My two nieces, eight and five, have both stuck me with needles," she said. "I've taught them the machine, how to put the needle in, tape around it, I've taught them all of it. They're my little doctors."

In September 2012, three and a half years after Gregg started dialysis, she was able to get a kidney transplant. As part of an exchange, her uncle donated a kidney to a woman whose son-in-law donated a kidney to Gregg. For the first six months, the donated kidney worked perfectly. At six months, her creatinine levels suddenly spiked again, and the doctors discovered that her body was rejecting the kidney.

"I was doing everything I was supposed to," said Gregg. "I was taking medicine, I quit smoking, I basically bubbled myself in the house. I couldn't be around crowds or germs."

However, despite doing everything right, the 54 daily pills she was taking were getting her sick. She was vomiting everything, including the medicine.

Gregg said that although she is on the transplant list again and will eventually get another kidney, she is fine with remaining on dialysis for the time being.

"I'm not in a rush to get [a kidney]," she said. "All this science is coming out with wearable kidneys or dialysis machines the size of a fanny pack. If I can hold off as long as I can doing at-home dialysis, that's what I'm going to do."