

Living Donor Liver Transplant

Linda's Story



Hello, my name is Linda. I am 70 years old, and I had a living donor liver transplant in November 2020. My liver troubles started sometime before 2014, the year that I retired. I do not know how long my liver had been not functioning well because I had no symptoms. That year, I had my first episode of ascites and was referred to a gastroenterologist. The diagnosis was cirrhosis of the liver and it was thought to be due to NASH. The doctor put me on several medications including diuretics. For the next six years, I had no serious issues, exercised five or six days a week, traveled, and ate a good general diet.

Then, in March 2020, the coronavirus pandemic happened, and the gyms closed. I tried to walk every day, but I soon became short of breath and weak from losing muscle. My health spiraled downward in a hurry. After a few health scares, my gastroenterologist said that it was time for me to talk to the UW Medicine Liver Transplant Team about a future liver transplant. I met with the UW team at the end of July and began the list of tests and consultations required for evaluation of transplant suitability. The blood genotyping also revealed that I had an uncommon form of Alpha 1–Antitrypsin Deficiency (A1AD) inherited from my parents' recessive genes. So my liver disease was caused by both NASH and probably A1AD, too. It is not easy to go

through the evaluation process and it took six weeks. In September, I was approved for the liver transplant list! Meanwhile, my wonderful and amazing daughter, Kathryn, learned about the option of living liver donor transplant, which would enable her to donate a part of her healthy liver to be transplanted into a recipient (me!). She knew that it would be tough and went ahead with her evaluation by the living donor team. Once Kathryn was approved, our surgeries were scheduled for approximately thirty days later. We both had plenty of opportunity to ask questions about the processes and risks involved.

Doctors Mark Sturdevant and Ramasamy Bakthavatsalam did a wonderful job of performing the dual surgeries. It was a long day for everyone, but no serious complications occurred. Excellent care and follow-up were provided by the entire living liver donor team. Kathryn's surgery was completed first (about eight hours). She came out of anesthesia later that same evening in ICU. My surgery was several hours longer (about twelve hours). It was an intense process, but recovery went alright. I have an incisional scar across my abdomen from the surgery, which is typical, and had about fifty staples in it! We were encouraged the first day to get up and go walking multiple times and every day afterwards. That turned out to be one of the best ways to feel better. The hospital staff was so professional, compassionate, inspiring, kind, and gentle.

Recovery at home for me took three months for the basics. Every day, there were small, incremental things that improved (like going short distances without a walker or using one foot per stair versus two feet per stair). It was extremely helpful to have additional support at home besides the two primary caregivers. Happily, all my staples were removed at one-month post-surgery. Early morning UWMC blood draws and liver clinic visits, twice a week at first, were hard. However, they did make me get up and move around and reassured me that everything was going as expected. Eventually, the clinic visits tapered off to every one or two weeks during the first three months. I am now five months post-surgery! I feel wonderful compared to last summer and fall. I have been exercising two or three times a week and rarely take a nap. I still get tired if I tackle too much or stand too long. That is normal, I hear, and full recovery will take a year. Kathryn recovered much more quickly than me. Per Dr. Sturdevant, both our livers have grown to about ninety percent of normal size. I am so thankful for everyone involved in this liver transplant journey.

