

Chronic pain can be obstacle to activity

Moving Grays Harbor
By Maryann Welch

When it comes to being or becoming physically active, lots of barriers can present themselves. Everything from rough schedules to childcare issues to financial limitations can set themselves up as roadblocks to achieving greater activity and health.

Injury and chronic pain can also become major obstacles to physical activity.

Our County Health Officer and local Family Practice Doctor, John Bausher, tells me that he sees a broad range of chronic musculo-skeletal conditions that keep people from participating in regular activity. These include back, knee and foot pain.

One of the most common and limiting ailments he sees is foot pain. But today I want to give you hope that this obstacle can often be overcome.

My "Exhibit A" is my husband, Jim. He gave me permission to share his recovery story today so that others could be encouraged.

If you've read this column over the last few months, you've learned that besides being the director of the Grays Harbor Public Health Department, I personally enjoy exercise and try to include various kinds of activity throughout my day.

My husband has never been an "exerciser," however, he has always been fairly active and works outdoors in the timber industry.

For several years Jim has been experiencing increasing foot pain. The pain began to really interfere with his daily activity level after he injured his heel last summer. By about Thanksgiving we were beginning to wonder how he could continue to operate his business since he could barely manage the pain during the day and gradually spent more time in his recliner in the evenings.

He'd even tell me "You don't understand how much this hurts." And he was right, I didn't.

But I did know that staying active helps a body – and mind – in so many ways. I was growing concerned that Jim would become less likely to engage in any activities that required him to be on his feet, which rules out many, many things!

But here comes the good news. Finally he visited Dr. John Bausher. (I know many of my women friends would agree that men are notorious for waiting too long to seek medical help.) This resulted in a referral to the Foot and Ankle Clinic at Harborview in Seattle.

There, Dr. Stephen Benirschke diagnosed Jim with contracture of the gastrocnemius – a muscle that runs down the back of the calf. This condition causes a chronically abnormal gait that stresses the foot. Jim's injury had really just made an existing problem worse.

Although surgery is an option for this condition, we were happy to learn that Jim's initial treatment would include learning some

stretching exercises to perform every day at home and a splint to be worn at night to keep the muscle stretched.

Jim began to feel relief in a short time and has now improved to the point that he will actually join me for a walk periodically. I've noticed that his evening recliner time has decreased, too. The last visit to Harborview showed that he has made great progress in keeping the gastrocnemius stretched out and just needs to keep up the exercises.

This has been a great emotional boost for Jim and I'm proud of him for sticking to the rehab plan.

Dr. Benierschka told us that the tight gastrocnemius is hereditary. Our daughter Katy is 25 and already seems prone to foot pain. He recommended that Jim teach her the stretching exercises so that she might keep a more severe problem from developing.

My point is, when it comes to an injury or ailment that prevents you from being active, don't give up!

Dr. Bausher stresses that there are no quick fixes for most chronic conditions: "These problems cannot be cured with a pill. I see the most success in people who persist with recommended rehabilitation or exercises over a long period of time."

So, if your ailment has become an obstacle to activity, hopefully the answer to your problem is as relatively simple as Jim's was. Talk to your doctor and then do what Jim did and obey the doctor's orders for rehabilitation to make sure it gets better and stays better.

I hope this has given some of you hope about becoming more active. Your whole self will feel better the

more you exercise. But do check with your doctor first!

Announcing the winner ...

Congratulations to Jana Johnson of Hoquiam! Jana won the drawing for the annual membership to the YMCA.

Thanks to all who submitted their comments on how this column has helped them get or stay active. And many thanks to the YMCA for the generous prize and for supporting health and fitness in our community!

Maryann Welch is the director of Grays Harbor County's Public Health and Social Services Department.

If you have questions about becoming more active or have information about free or low-cost activity in the area, contact the health department at 532-8665 ext. 483, e-mail us at moving@co.grays-harbor.wa.us or visit our web site at www.ghphss.org.