

Athlete Faces Her Toughest Comeback Challenge

I am a women's tennis coach at a Division 1 university in Massachusetts. I am extremely active playing and teaching tennis; in the summer at least 5 hours each day and I run about 3-4 miles 4-5 times every week. I am 55 years old and have always been very active.

Last summer I began experiencing what seemed like chronic fatigue, headaches, and worst of all dizziness. I thought that it might have something to do with my allergies so I did nothing about it. After about 10 days the dizziness subsided although the other 2 symptoms remained. Maybe overworking? In July I again experienced dizziness to the point that I was nauseous daily and I began to walk with my head down and kept it very still. I could fall asleep at the drop of a hat and often went to bed at 8pm. My personality was affected because I no longer wanted to do anything active and I did not want to socialize with friends. I couldn't wait to get to the end of each day with the hope that the next day would be better.

In August I went to my GP for an annual physical and told her all of my symptoms. She told me to take bovine for the dizziness even though this would knock me out and put me to sleep. I couldn't do this because I already was so sleepy and my job required me to be active. She suggested a visit to an Ear, Nose and Throat Specialist.

I went to that appointment and was told there was nothing wrong. This just made me more despairing and I began to think that I would have to spend the rest of my life dizzy and that my life would now change drastically. I could suffer through the headaches and chronic fatigue but the dizziness was awful to live with.

For months I just lived this way believing that I had no recourse. Then in December, I collapsed in a restaurant waiting to eat with friends. Before this evening I had never fainted (not even close) even though I played many tennis matches in extreme heat. My blood pressure had dropped and my heart rate also dropped. I was out for a few minutes and rushed to the hospital where I stayed in the Cardiac Unit for 5 days. The doctors said that I had experienced a neurocardiogenic syncope and put me on medication to raise my blood pressure. In the meantime I was visited by a neurologist to see what was causing the dizziness. The cardiologists ruled out the heart because I could make myself dizzier by shaking my head. I had an MRI and the doctor found a syrinx traveling down my spine and a Chiari 1 Malformation. He suggested that I make an appointment at Mass General for a consult. He also told me that I probably would need an operation to put a shunt in my neck to drain the syrinx.

In January the symptoms grew worse. Now I developed weakness in my right leg and often misstepped when running. I had to run with my head down so that I wouldn't get more dizzy but I was determined to have a life. I didn't tell very many people because I felt like such a complainer. My vision started to get worse and in mid January while I was sitting at my computer I began to lose my vision even more. I was scheduled for an appointment with a neurosurgeon at MG on that Friday but I was driven up to the hospital that day and admitted. The surgeon performed a 5 hour decompression surgery on the Chiari 1 and I was released 6 days later.

It has been 4 months of recovery so far and while I get better each week it is agonizingly slow. I thought that I would bounce back after a recovery of about 2 months, especially because I am in good shape. This is not the case. Most of my symptoms are gone except that I still experience headaches up the back of my head and dizziness (although very minor compared to before the operation) when I get tired. I am learning to live a slower life and although I expect a full recovery I know that this has changed my life. I am no longer frustrated by no one knowing what is wrong. Thank goodness for the internet where I could read about this condition and get some hope and answers. I am writing this with the hope that I can help someone else in my situation.

-- Judy Dixon, Amherst MA

Would you like to share your perspective? Submit to: director@conquerchiari.org Type "Perspectives" in the subject line.