

Esophageal cancer: Drop the bottle and cigarettes

In his year-long battle with [cancer of the esophagus](#), Jim Corby encountered many nerve-wracking moments.

But when asked about it, one memory comes to mind for the 61-year-old retired construction worker from Alton, Illinois. One that happened far away from a doctor's office.

On July 27, 2022, Corby was chosen to throw the ceremonial first pitch at the Alton River Dragons baseball game. Members of care team at [OSF HealthCare Moeller Cancer Center](#) in Alton, James Piephoff, MD, and Manpreet Sandhu, MD, were at his side. Also watching was a group of young women Corby coaches on the softball diamond.

"He knew if he didn't throw a strike, he would never hear the end of it from the girls on his team," Dr. Piephoff says.

No pressure, Jim.

Esophageal cancer: The basics

Dr. Piephoff, a radiation oncologist, says around 20,000 people in the United States are diagnosed with esophageal cancer each year. The cancer claims around 16,000 lives in the U.S. each year.

There are two types. The most common (around 70% of U.S. cases) is adenocarcinoma in the lower esophagus. The other type is squamous cell carcinoma, typically above where the airway separates into the lungs.

Both types are associated with excess smoking and drinking, something Corby found out the hard way.

"I smoked two-and-a-half to three packs of cigarettes a day," Corby says. "The day I went in for surgery, I threw them out the window. I haven't smoked since."

Obesity is also a risk factor for adenocarcinoma.

"Obesity leads to increased risk of gastroesophageal reflux disease," Dr. Piephoff explains. "It's the acid churning up in the lower esophagus that leads to the risk of developing what's called Barrett's esophagus. That's a precancerous condition."

Screening isn't common for cancer of the esophagus, so Dr. Piephoff says it's important to watch for symptoms, which can mimic those of heartburn. See a doctor if symptoms won't go away.

"Know your body. Don't be afraid to talk to your doctors about it. Don't try to minimize your symptoms," Dr. Piephoff urges. "If there's a change you notice, you need to convey that to your doctor."

On treatment, Dr. Piephoff says he typically sees a person go through chemotherapy and radiation to shrink the cancer followed by surgery to remove the tumor. During surgery, instruments are sent down the throat and not through the chest, meaning an easier recovery for the person. Early detection could mean surgery only.

"There are some patients who are not able to have surgery because of medical conditions like a bad heart or bad lungs," Dr. Piephoff says. "They get treated with radiation and chemotherapy without surgery."

Immunotherapy is also a part of the treatment plan for some people. This involves changing how your immune system works so it can fight cancer, according to the American Cancer Society.

Jim's journey

Corby says he started having pain in his midsection last year when he ate. Treatment for heartburn and acid reflux didn't help. An ultrasound and CT scan didn't get his doctors any closer to a solution. All the while, Corby says it hurt so much to eat, he started losing weight.

In September 2021, doctors examined Corby's esophagus with a camera.

"The doctor came in and sat down, which I knew was not a good sign," Corby recalls.

"That day was when my life changed," he says.

The exam found a cancerous mass in Corby's lower esophagus. The next few months were a whirlwind.

"It happened real fast," Corby says.

"They got me here [to Moeller Cancer Center] to see Dr. Piephoff and Dr. Sandhu. They came up with a program to try to get me going," Corby says. "I went through chemotherapy and radiation first. Then they sent me over to St. Louis, and in January I had surgery."

The surgery to remove the cancer preceded a nine day stay in the hospital where Corby says he couldn't eat or drink aside from the occasional ice cubes or water sopped from a sponge.

Sometime later – Corby can't remember exactly when – he was back at OSF Moeller Cancer Center meeting with Dr. Sandhu.

"She said 'Your scan came back. You're cancer free.'" Corby says.

"I couldn't believe it," Corby adds. "How many times do you hear about people who have cancer who die? You hear more of that than you do cancer free.

"The odds were against me 100%, but I guess I beat the odds."

The first pitch

Corby's first pitch at the River Dragons game went – where else? – right down the middle of the plate, eliciting a cheer from his support system and all the fans learning his story for the first time. For Corby, it was a sigh of relief. No need to worry about razzing from his softball players.

"I got lucky," Corby says, fighting back happy tears.

Learn more

Visit the [OSF HealthCare website](#) to learn about cancer treatment.