

Woman optimistic after trip overseas for surgery

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LONG BRANCH -- Connie Haber is looking forward to a life without pain. Although there are no guarantees, Haber, who last month went to Sleigenstadt, Germany, for surgery to remove abdominal adhesions, is hopeful. She also is back home after her two-week stay in Europe.

While she still has some post-surgical pain, she is optimistic that the special adhesion barrier Dr. Daniel Kruschinski sprayed on her abdominal organs did its job. She had the surgery in Germany because the gel Kruschinski applied has not yet been approved for use in this country.

The goal was to have the gel remain in place for up to seven days before being absorbed by Haber's body, Kruschinski said in an interview last month. Adhesions -- a type of scar tissue -- start to form when the tissue is being damaged and stop when the wound has healed.

"I'm recovering from surgery so it is expected to be a little tired," Haber, 44, said during an interview at her Elberon section home. "It is a devastating disease, because you never know when it is going to recur."

If Haber sounds a little tentative, it is because during her "second look" surgery Aug. 15, the doctor identified a growth that could be a "pre-adhesion." The doctor didn't have to cut it because he was able to push the formation down with a dissection tool. Then he pronounced Haber "adhesion-free."

"You think you've been cured through a surgical procedure," she said. "If you can live with adhesions through pain management, surgery shouldn't be an option because surgery will (sometimes) cause more adhesions. Right now I'm OK, but you never know."

The laproscopic procedure enabled Haber to recover quickly, said Haber's mother, Fortune Gemel of Deal. "She was great," Gemel said. Two days later, she was riding a bicycle."

Adhesions are bands of tissue that commonly form after trauma such as surgery or an infection. They don't form in every surgical patient, but when they do, the adhesions connect organs that usually exist separately in the abdominal cavity.

Adhesions can pull an organ out of shape and "tether" it to another organ or to the abdominal wall, according to the American Adhesions Support Group, a branch of the Australian Adhesions Support Group Inc.

Adhesions, which also can be caused by endometriosis, chemotherapy, radiation and cancer, cause chronic abdominal and pelvic pain, infertility and recurrent bowel obstructions.

More than 300,000 people a year are hospitalized for treatment of adhesions, according to the support groups. And about 500,000 surgical procedures are performed annually to remove adhesions.

"Follow-up care is important not only because adhesions cause pain but also

because they cause other problems in the body like fatigue and headaches," Haber said. "If your bowels aren't functioning right, you're not going to be a healthy person."

Because the pain can be undiagnosed for a long time, many patients suffer from depression, according to Anthea Nesbitt, American coordinator for the support group.

For Haber, the mother of five, gastric-bypass surgery in November 2000 started a cycle of pain that manifested a year later when she began to feel pinching and stabbing sensations in her abdomen.

In June 2002, Haber had to have additional surgery -- this time for a bowel obstruction -- and she was diagnosed with Adhesions Related Disorder. In January 2003, she had a third surgery, for another bowel obstruction.

"We wait and see if the pain develops," Haber said. "But wait. That's like a pessimistic response."

Haber wants to be positive.

"I'm going to move on and to continue with my daily activities," she said.

Haber, who called the adhesion barrier being developed by Confluent Surgical/Nektor Therapeutics "almost our best hope," wants to stay active in the fight against the disease. She is looking forward to Sept. 25, which in New Jersey has been designated as Adhesion Related Disorder Awareness Day through sponsor Sen. Joseph A. Palaia, R-Monmouth. It was Haber who pushed for the resolution. Through her work, New Jersey has become the fourth state to recognize ARD -- after Wisconsin, New York and Louisiana.

Now she is organizing the Adhesions Awareness Campaign Fund, Box 346, Deal, NJ 07723, which she says will be used to help educate people about the disorder. Donations can be sent to that address.

"People are desperate for help," she said.

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