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Chasing a new life

An update on Jaime Polhemus' battle

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(Photo Contributed)

Caption

Jaime Russell-Polhemus of Princeton is undergoing a stem cell transplant in hopes to rid her body of Stiff Person Syndrome (SPS). Polhemus began the advanced procedure on Monday, July 6, in Chicago. If all goes as planned she hopes to return to a normal life by mid-August.

PRINCETON — Jaime Russell-Polhemus of Princeton is on a journey to a new life.

As previously reported, Polhemus was diagnosed with Stiff Person Syndrome (SPS) in 2013.

SPS is a degenerative progressive neurological disease. The life-threatening symptoms include muscle stiffness, spasms, specific contractions that are triggered by noise, touch or emotional distress.

While there is no definitive cure, Polhemus came across information about a stem cell transplant procedure other patients with autoimmune diseases had undergone to cure their symptoms.

Polhemus also found Dr. Richard Burt, who has been called an expert in the treatment of autoimmune conditions using the stem cell transplantation, was based at Northwestern University in Chicago.

After one visit to Dr. Burt, Polhemus was taken in as one of his patients to undergo the advanced procedure.

The first steps in stem cell transplant

On Monday, July 6, Polhemus was admitted to the hospital where she began her first round of chemotherapy to kill off the “bad cells,” which carry the antibodies that cause the SPS symptoms.

She said the process went well, aside from the expected side effects of chemo such as nausea and fatigue.

Following the chemotherapy, she started self injections of Neupogen, which helped the growth of new baby stem cells.

On Thursday, July 16, Polhemus underwent a day-long procedure where doctors pulled two million of her stem cells from a port that was surgically placed into her body near her shoulder.

Once the cells were removed, they were purified, preserved and placed into a freezer. Polhemus was able to return home for a couple days.

What's to come

Polhemus plans to return to the hospital in Chicago on Thursday, July 23, where she will be readmitted and begin what she calls “extreme chemo.”

This is a critical part in the procedure where the chemo will kill off most of her cells and her immune system. Polhemus will have to be kept in total isolation as her immune system will be totally compromised. She will be highly susceptible to pneumonia or other infections.

On Thursday, July 30, Dr. Burt plans to re-transplant the baby stem cells that were preserved into her body. These new cells do not carry the antibodies her adult stem cells had, and have no memory of SPS.

Once they are placed back, Polhemus said it will take time for the new cells to adjust.

“Even though they are your own cells — because they have been purified and preserved and put back — it could take awhile to adhere or go back into the bone to start making more cells,” she said.

Doctors will have to graft her bone, and she will have to go back on Neupogen injections to stimulate the growth of new cells.

“If I’m lucky and they graft right away, I should be out by mid-August,” she said.

Doctors have told her the first three months after the procedure will continue to be difficult with her weakened immune system. Her children will have to be home-schooled to prevent the spreading of germs or infections. Polhemus will also have to stay away from large crowds as her immune system makes a comeback.

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