LIFESTYLES

Life-changing experience: Transplant could mean end to insulin pump for Elba mom

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ELBA -- Kim Walls said she never followed a diet during her 21 years as a diabetic.

Sweets like jelly beans and snack cakes weren't off limits for the former Batavian.

That's changed since a so far successful surgery in Philadelphia this spring that could end her dependency on insulin.

Walls, 37, is on a low-carb diet that limits her to 30 to 40 grams of carbohydrates per meal. No snacks and no sweets, she said, for what will probably be the next one to two years.

But the married mother of two doesn't mind the culinary sacrifice.

"It's actually been a lot easier than I thought it would be because I know how important it is," she said during an interview on the front porch of her home in Elba.

The significance is "life-changing" to Walls who was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes when she was 15 years old and has been wearing an insulin pump to control her blood sugar for the last 12 years.

The high-tech pump could be history this summer if all continues to go well in the aftermath of islet (pronounced eye-lit) transplant surgery in May at the University of Pennsylvania's Hospital at Penn in Philadelphia.

Islets are insulin-producing cells. Walls said 650,000 of them were transplanted into her liver during a procedure that probably took an hour and a half from start to finish.

She was sedated, she said, but still got to watch the process where the cells traveled through a catheter into the portal vein of her liver.

"It was pretty neat being aware of it," she said.

Walls had the transplant as part of a national study that she ran across on the Internet two years ago.

Recovery didn't take long. Walls said she got up on her feet right after she was wheeled back to her hospital room. "I didn't have any pain," she said.

The new cells automatically start to produce insulin, according to Walls, who was discharged from the hospital four days later and back to work in a week at her job as residence manager for Lifetime Assistance, a not-for-profit agency in Le Roy that serves the mentally handicapped and developmentally disabled.
Doctors want her to continue on insulin for 60 days, she said, as the transplanted cells grow into her system.

"They don't want to overwork the new cells," she said.

Walls and her husband, Mike, have been back to the Philadelphia medical center a 6/12-hour drive four times for post-surgery blood tests and other tests. The results have so far been good.

"They're (the new cells) doing their job, basically," she said.

She and her husband were back in Philadelphia last week for kidney tests heading toward a June 28 date, "Day 58," she calls it, when, if all goes well, doctors will look at weaning her off insulin.

Based on last week's visit, prospects for that seem good. Doctors told Walls things are going so well that they could take her off the pump right away if she were not part of the study that calls for the 60-day guideline, her husband said in an update last weekend.

Kim Walls said Sunday night her blood sugar numbers were "fantastic."

"It's hard to believe, almost surreal," she said of the progress she's made and the possibility that she may no longer need to use an insulin pump. "It felt like someone had pinched me."

Final word will follow another round of tests in mid-July.

It's all "exciting," but it's also nerve-wracking at the same time, Kim said.

"I've been a diabetic for 21 years and I've always taken insulin injections. This (pump) has basically been my life support for the last 12 years," she said.

With the diet switch, Walls said she reads a lot of food labels and has lost 10 pounds, which her doctors said will probably help the transplanted cells.

She's learned that a slice of bread amounts to about 15 carbs and a glass of milk, around 13.

"So I eat a lot of salads and a lot of chicken," she said.

She's also big on sugar-free Jell-O and has discovered that, at 18 carbs a serving, frozen, sugar-free yogurt fills the bill as well.

"It was actually pretty good," she said.

Walls said her husband, who works as a truck driver, does the grocery shopping. She prints out a list of low-carb items, she said, for him to add to the grocery list.

"It's been a family effort," she said.

It helps that their children, Lucas, 6, and Rachel, 4, love chicken. "We try to eat the same thing," she said.

Walls said she expects to be on some sort of low-carb diet after the initial diet period ends, but hopes it's not as restrictive. "Eventually, I'll be able to incorporate snacks, I hope."

Mike Walls said his mother and grandmother had diabetes, so he "kind of knew a little" about the condition when he and his wife met.

In another wrinkle, Mike said that, while his parents grew up in Oakfield, his mother once worked at the university hospital where Kim had her transplant and his father went to college in Philadelphia, at the Wharton School of Business.

"I'm like, wow, the coincidences," said Kim.

Kim got the islet cell transplant as part of a study that she ran across on the Internet. Her's was the eighth transplant done at the Philadelphia site, she said, and there are eight other centers in the U.S. and Canada that offer the procedures as part of the same study.
Along the way, the Walls has learned that a former Batavian, Anthony Pecora, was the first person in the country to receive an islet cell transplant.

His was at the University of Minnesota, Kim said. He no longer lives in the area, she said, but she has exchanged e-mails with him.

"It was pretty cool to know that somebody who had the first transplant was from my home town," she said. The Walls don't know the name of the donor in Kim's case, only that it was a 25-year-old male from Delaware. Kim said she's been told she could write anonymously to the man's family and she intends to do that.

"I've thought a lot about how do I thank them," she said.

"Thank you doesn't seem to be enough," said her husband.

Kim said the entire experience has "definitely been a life-changing experience" for her and that writing to the young man's family will hopefully bring them some sort of peace.

It's tragic to lose a loved one, she said. "The letter, I hope it brings them some peace."

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