Family, faith and science help battle brain tumor

In early October, a trip to the Emergency Department would finally reveal what was causing Rouse's symptoms. She had a brain tumor. Jonathan Bledsoe, M.D., a neurosurgeon at Mayo Clinic Health System in Eau Claire and Menomonie, removed the bulk of Rouse's tumor in two surgeries. Testing revealed the tumor was glioblastoma, an aggressive type of cancer. Rouse was referred to Mayo Clinic in Rochester to meet with Joon Uhm, M.D., chair of Neuro-Oncology at Mayo Clinic.

Dr. Uhm provided more information on Rouse's tumor and outlined an initial treatment plan that would include six weeks of radiation and 10 weeks of daily oral chemotherapy.

“Dr. Uhm guided Ali’s treatment, but she was able to get most of her care here which was more convenient for her and her family,” Dr. Bledsoe says. “Cancer treatment is difficult, and having to travel makes it even more so. We collaborate with Rochester and are able to provide most of the same treatment options here in Eau Claire.”

That’s something Rouse, who has young children, appreciates. “I’ve been more exhausted than I knew was possible,” she says. “Sometimes it hurts just to keep my eyes open.”

When Rouse completed her first course of treatment, she met with Dr. Uhm again and he outlined a new plan. This one included additional chemotherapy as well as the use of a device called Optune, which delivers electric fields to the brain to help stop the growth of cancer cells. It’s FDA-approved for treating aggressive brain tumors. “I wear electrodes connected to my head, and the electrical impulses interrupt cell division,” says Rouse, who wears the device 90 percent of the time.

While her world has changed, Rouse says she’s still “living a normal life.” It’s a life that includes spending as much time as possible with friends and family, especially her husband, Dan, and their kids, 12-year-old Will and 10-year-old Becca. “I have a huge support system,” Rouse says. “People have given us food and gift certificates and babysat for us. I feel for people who don’t have that kind of support.”

In addition to her family and friends, Rouse leans on her field and her faith for support. “I believe in science,” she says. “I also have a strong faith in God. I do feel that God has a plan. I just don’t understand the plan.”

When the headaches started in the spring of 2018, they were brief but intense: two minutes of the worst pain Ali Rouse had experienced. Doctors told Rouse not to worry. “They said, ‘You’re a sixth-grade teacher. Of course you have headaches!’” Rouse recalls. When she began experiencing fatigue, doctors told her the same thing.

Over the next several months, the headaches and fatigue got worse. When a new school year started in the fall, Rouse would sometimes even fall asleep in class. She was also experiencing nausea. “I started to wonder if I’d gotten Lyme disease,” Rouse, a science teacher at DeLong Middle School in Eau Claire, says.
Whether they’re pounding, pulsing or piercing, headaches are a pain. Scott Spritzer, D.O., a neurologist at Mayo Clinic Health System in Eau Claire, shares tips for taming — and possibly preventing — common types of headaches.

Know your type
“Tend to talk about headaches as if there’s just one type, but that’s not the case. There are real differences, and treatment options depend on the type of headache,” Dr. Spritzer says. “Your provider’s primary goal when evaluating headaches is to be sure there is not a worrisome secondary cause to the headaches. After performing an evaluation and completing any necessary tests, your provider then is able to distinguish primary headache disorders from headaches that are due to something else.

The most common headache types are:
- **Tension**
  These headaches cause dull and achy pain. They may include a sensation of tightness or pressure across your forehead, or on the sides and back of your head.
- **Migraine**
  These headaches cause severe, throbbing pain, usually on one side of the head. They’re often accompanied by nausea or vomiting, and may last up to three days.
- **Cluster**
  These headaches are sudden, severe and repetitive. The pain often is focused around one eye. Cluster headaches generally come at the same time every day for a period of time, usually from several weeks to several months. Then they stop for a period of time — months or years — before striking again.

Common treatments
“I always try and emphasize the benefits of nonmedication headache treatments, as they alone may help significantly,” Dr. Spritzer says. “There is evidence that nonmedication treatments like mindfulness, cognitive behavioral therapy and progressive muscle relaxation therapy can help people with chronic headaches. In many circumstances, medications also may be part of your headache treatment plan.”

Some medication treatment options include:
- **Over-the-counter pain relievers**
  Aspirin, ibuprofen and acetaminophen all may do the trick for tension headaches and migraines, but they won’t relieve cluster headaches.
- **Prescription medications**
  A number of prescription medications can be used to treat migraines and the nausea that often accompanies them. There are also medications that can be taken to prevent migraines. Some of these medications also work on cluster headaches.

Prevention
“A number of lifestyle factors can impact the likelihood of developing tension headaches and migraines,” Dr. Spritzer says. “Managing those factors can not only help you avoid pain, but also have other health benefits, as well.

Dr. Spritzer makes these headache prevention recommendations:
- **Exercise.**
  Aerobic exercise releases tension and stress, which can contribute to developing headaches.
- **Get enough sleep.**
  Aim for enough sleep — seven to nine hours for adults — and try to go to bed and get up at the same time each day.

- **Limit caffeine and alcohol.**
  Too much caffeine and alcohol can cause headaches.
- **Know your food triggers.**
  Certain foods, such as chocolate, aged cheese, processed meats and foods containing gluten, may trigger migraines.
- **Don’t take too many as-needed medications.**
  Overuse of as-needed headache medications, even over-the-counter pain medications, can lead to rebound headaches, which can make the primary headache problem much more difficult to manage.
- **Stress less.**
  Find healthy ways to manage the stress in your life. That may mean scheduling time with friends, taking a yoga class or learning to say no.

“Chronic headaches can be extremely distressing,” Dr. Spritzer says. “It’s exhausting to live with pain. Don’t be afraid to talk to your health care provider about treatment options.”

To print a headache tracker, visit mayoclinichealthsystem.org/headache.

Oh, my aching head
Late harvest bounty

Pumpkin isn’t just for pies and lattes. The fall staple can be added to a host of foods for a tasty — and healthy — treat.

“Pumpkin is a great source of vitamin A, fiber and potassium,” says Nancy Olson, a dietitian and certified diabetes educator at Mayo Clinic Health System in Red Wing.

To get some of those benefits, use pumpkin puree in place of butter or oil in baked goods. Or try this easy soup recipe for a warm dose of fall flavor.

Our Hometown Health blog is a place for you to get information and resources to improve your health and well-being.

Here are five recent posts that generated some buzz:

“Mental and emotional health assessment”
Many aspects affect your mental and emotional health, including worry, mood, sleep, stress, relationships and alcohol consumption. Take a few minutes to answer nine questions that will help evaluate your wellness.

“Kindhearted kid perseveres through multiple heart surgeries”
Matthew Makela is a 3-year-old who tucks in 20 stuffed animals nightly and gives his younger sister a kiss, hug and farewell at day care drop-off. He’s also a kid who had his first cardiac surgery at seven days old. Read about his congenital heart defects and watch a video of him run the bases at a local baseball game.

“What is a spinal fusion, and does it work?”
“Oh, my aching back!” If your back pain is caused by structural issues, and not muscle or ligament strain, find out what spinal fusion is and how you may benefit.

“Is Botox the fix for all facial wrinkles?”
Botox is a great treatment for some but not all facial wrinkles. Learn about other treatment options that can help restore a more youthful appearance.

“Over-the-counter prescription medication safety”
When medication is prescribed by a health care provider and taken correctly, it can help you with day-to-day life. But did you know that you also should take precautions with over-the-counter medications?

Pumpkin Soup

Ingredients
Servings: 4

3/4 cup water, divided
1 small onion, chopped
1 can (15 ounces) pumpkin puree
2 cups unsalted vegetable broth
1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
1/4 teaspoon ground nutmeg
1 cup fat-free milk
1 green onion top, chopped

Nutrition information per serving:
77 calories; calories from fat; 1 g fat (trace amounts of saturated fat; 0 g trans fats); 1 mg cholesterol; 57 mg sodium; 14 g carbohydrate; 4 g fiber; 0 g added sugars; 3 g protein.

Directions

In a large saucepan, heat 1/4 cup water over medium heat. Add the onion and cook until tender, about 3 minutes. Don’t let the onion dry out.

Add the remaining water, pumpkin, broth, cinnamon and nutmeg. Bring to a boil, reduce heat and simmer for 5 minutes. Stir in the milk and cook until hot. Don’t boil.

Ladle soup into warmed bowls, and garnish with black pepper and green onion tops. Serve immediately.

For more healthy recipes, and to learn how to make your own pumpkin puree, visit mayoclinichealthsystem.org/healthyrecipes.

Read these and more blogs at mayoclinichealthsystem.org/hometown-health.
What should I say, and how I can help a loved one who has a problem with drugs or alcohol?

Communicating with someone you love about a drug or alcohol problem can be challenging and painful. People who are addicted to drugs or alcohol sometimes can be in denial and may not recognize the negative effects that their drug or alcohol use has on them — and on others. A caring, honest conversation may lead them to get the help they need.

Let them know that you are concerned about them, and share examples that illustrate why. Tell them about destructive behaviors you have seen and the effects those behaviors have on them, as well as family and friends. Maybe their drug or alcohol use has caused them to call in sick to work, putting their job at risk. Or maybe they’ve missed important family functions or their children’s events because of their use. Try to be as specific as possible about what you have seen. And be ready to offer solutions to help them quit using, such as offering contact information for treatment professionals, sober living options, Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous meetings, and treatment facilities nearby.

If a one-on-one conversation doesn’t help them, you may want to stage an intervention. This is a structured process that involves family; friends; and often a professional, such as a doctor or drug and alcohol counselor. An intervention should be well-planned, with each person involved knowing exactly what he or she is going to say to them. You also should have treatment ideas to present to them. If they decline treatment, friends and family should be ready to take action on consequences that they may have presented during the intervention.

These are not easy conversations to have or easy steps to take. But these conversations and steps could save their lives. Lead with love and compassion in these conversations because addiction is a disease. But it is a disease that can be treated. There is hope, and talking about the problem is the first step toward freedom from addiction.

How is stress connected to my physical health? How can I manage stress in our 24/7 connected world?

If you’ve spent a day with cranky kids (or cranky cows) or been stuck in traffic when you’re supposed to be at an appointment, you’re probably familiar with some of the ways stress can affect your body. You may have felt tight muscles in your neck, a pounding headache or pure exhaustion.

When you live with stress over a longer period, the physical effects are greater. Today’s fast-paced lifestyles and 24/7 connectivity mean that many of us are experiencing stress on a near-constant basis. That means our body’s stress response system, which is meant to act as an alarm alerting us to immediate dangers, is engaged all the time, releasing a constant flood of hormones that trigger a number of responses in our bodies. The release of adrenaline leads to increased heart rate and higher blood pressure. Surging cortisol leads to an increased amount of blood sugar in the bloodstream.

Over time, these responses can contribute to the development of many serious health problems, including heart disease, diabetes, anxiety and depression. That’s why it’s important to find ways to manage stress. Start with foundational habits, which can go a long way toward managing stress. Get enough sleep, eat healthy foods, and get some physical activity most days of the week.

Work on being present in the moment. Avoid constantly checking your phone. Instead focus on what you’re doing and the people you are with. Take focus a step further by meditating. There are some great apps that can help you get started. Yoga is another great way to focus and calm your mind while also moving your body.

And don’t be afraid to set boundaries. Saying no to work, family or friends can be hard. But it’s important to carve out time for yourself. Making space in your life for self-care means that you’ll be better able to handle the obligations you commit to.

Matthew Cabrera Svendsen, M.D., Family Medicine, Barron
Ways to keep your memory sharp

Everyone has a memory slip now and then. But those slips can become more frequent as you age. To turn back time — or try to — consider the simple activities to the right. Each of these activities may help slow memory loss and lower your risk of developing Alzheimer’s disease or other dementias, according to Donn Dexter, M.D., a neurologist at Mayo Clinic Health System in Eau Claire:

1. **Get moving.** Exercise appears to benefit your brain and your body. Active people are less likely to experience a decline in their mental function, and they have a lower risk of developing Alzheimer’s disease. Aim for at least 150 minutes of physical activity per week.

2. **Get your Z’s.** Sleep consolidates memories, which makes them easier to recall. Sleep also may clear abnormal proteins from your brain. Aim for seven to nine hours of sleep per night.

3. **Go Greek.** Following a Mediterranean diet — heavy on plant-based foods, whole grains and healthy fats, and light on red meat and salt — is associated with a reduced risk of Alzheimer’s disease.

4. **Train your brain.** Exercise keeps your muscles strong while mental exercise keeps your brain strong. Do crossword puzzles or sudoku. Play bridge. Learn something new.

5. **Get social — and not just on your phone.** Spending time with others can ward off depression and stress, which can contribute to memory loss. So invite your neighbors over for coffee or take a walk with a friend. Volunteer at your place of worship or an elementary school.

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**BACK PAIN COSTS**

$100-200 BILLION

annually with ⅓ being lost wages and productivity.

80% OF THE POPULATION will have low back pain in their lifetime.

25% OF THAT POPULATION REPORT back pain in the past 3 months.

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**TREATMENT OPTIONS**

- Rest and activity modification
- Physical therapy
- Pain medication
- Spinal manipulation and chiropractic
- Steroid injections
- Surgery, in some cases
- Complementary and integrative health treatments (massage and acupuncture)
- Adult stem cells (experimental)
- Neurostimulation therapy, in some cases

**DATA TRACK**

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**Source:** National Institutes of Health

**Download back pain graphic** at mayoclinichealthsystem.org/achingback.

**Get additional memory tips** at mayoclinichealthsystem.org/64321.
When it comes to back pain, there’s good news and bad news.

“The good news is it’s rarely a sign of something serious and usually relatively short-lived,” says Mark Pichelmann, M.D., a neurosurgeon at Mayo Clinic Health System in Eau Claire. “The bad news is that it’s common. Most of us will experience an episode or more of back pain that limits our activities at some point.”

What’s behind the pain?
Dr. Pichelmann shares that the most common causes of back pain include:

- **Muscle or ligament strain**
  Repeatedly lifting heavy objects or twisting your back quickly can strain muscles and spinal ligaments. Carrying extra weight can strain your back, leading to pain.

- **Bulging or ruptured disks**
  Disks — the cushioning between the bones in your spine — can bulge or rupture, and press on a nerve.

- **Arthritis**
  Lower back pain sometimes is caused by osteoarthritis. Arthritis also can lead to a narrowing of the space around the spinal cord, a condition called spinal stenosis.
  Dr. Pichelmann says that it’s not always possible to pinpoint a reason for back pain.
  “Sometimes you can trace back pain to muscle strain from a fall or from lifting something heavy,”
  Dr. Pichelmann says. “But commonly we see patients who can’t tie their pain to any specific activity or event.”

- **Build muscle strength and flexibility.**
  Stretching your back, and strengthening your back and core muscles, can support and protect your back.

- **Sit, stand and lift correctly.**
  Avoid slouching, and standing or sitting in one position, for too long.
  When you have to lift something heavy, lift from your legs — not your back.

- **Maintain a healthy weight.**
  Carrying extra pounds strains back muscles.

- **If you smoke, quit.**
  Smoking reduces blood flow to the lower spine, which can keep your body from delivering enough nutrients to the disks in your back.

Relief
When you’re hurting, you may want to head for the couch. But that’s moving in the wrong direction, Dr. Pichelmann says.

“You want to keep doing your regular activities and even light exercise, if you can tolerate it,” Dr. Pichelmann says. “If activity makes the pain worse, you may have to slow down a little for a short period of time.”

Over-the-counter pain medications, such as ibuprofen or naproxen, might be enough to ease the pain.

If your pain isn’t better after several weeks, Dr. Pichelmann says you may need to see your health care provider for an evaluation.

Prevention
“The best way to avoid back pain is to prevent it by taking good care of your back,” Dr. Pichelmann says.

He recommends:
- **Exercise.**
  Walking, swimming and other low-impact aerobic activities can strengthen your back.

- **Sit, stand and lift correctly.**
  Avoid slouching, and standing or sitting in one position, for too long.

- **Maintain a healthy weight.**
  Carrying extra pounds strains back muscles.

- **If you smoke, quit.**
  Smoking reduces blood flow to the lower spine, which can keep your body from delivering enough nutrients to the disks in your back.

When to worry
Rarely, back pain may be a sign of something serious. However, you should schedule an appointment with your health care provider if you have pain that:

- Follows a fall, blow to your back or other injury
- Is constant or intense, especially at night or when you lie down
- Spreads down one or both legs, especially if the pain extends below your knee
- Causes weakness, numbness or tingling in one or both legs
- Occurs with swelling or redness on your back, which could indicate an infection
- Occurs with unintended weight loss
- Occurs with new bowel or bladder control problems

To learn more and download a back pain graphic, visit mayoclinichealthsystem.org/achingback.
Posture check

Modern life seems to be conspiring against your better habits. You want to stand tall and sit up straight. But cellphones draw your eyes down, curving your neck.

At work, many spend their days staring at a computer, slouching rather than sitting at attention. Those habits can strain muscles and joints, causing body pain.

“Good posture is not just about the way you look,” says Andrew Jagim, Ph.D., director of Sports Medicine Research at Mayo Clinic Health System in Onalaska. “It can have an effect on how you feel in addition to impacting certain movement abilities over time.”

Find your healthy posture

Dr. Jagim shares this technique for finding your healthy posture: stand up against a wall with your upper back, shoulders and bottom touching the wall. Your feet should be a couple of inches away from the wall. Step away from the wall and maintain that position. “It will get easier over time as your muscles strengthen,” Dr. Jagim says.

Sitting strategies

Frequent standing is one of the easiest ways to protect against the harms of sitting. “If you work at a desk, try to get up at least once an hour,” Dr. Jagim says. “Walk to talk to a colleague or get a drink of water. While you’re up, take a minute to focus on your posture and do a few light stretches.”

Dr. Jagim recommends that your desk is set up to support proper body alignment.

Check that:
- Your keyboard is at elbow height, so your hands can rest on the desk.
- Your computer screen or laptop is at eye level.
- Your chair’s height allows your feet to touch the ground.

Cellphone tips

Dr. Jagim says that when you’re looking at your cellphone, you should hold it at eye level. “That way, you’re not bending forward and straining your neck,” he says.

To download more posture tips, visit mayoclinichealthsystem.org/exercise.