

Leigh's Story

Three years and 100lbs ago, 28 year old Leigh Fischer had never heard of fatty liver disease and had no idea that his health was in jeopardy.

He was fortunate that his doctor did bloodwork when he came in complaining about a pain in his side that he thought was just a pulled muscle. Tests showed elevated liver enzymes and after a referral to a liver specialist, he was diagnosed with fatty liver disease.

Fatty liver disease is caused by fat build up in the liver which leads to inflammation and can progress to scarring (cirrhosis), liver cancer, and even liver failure and the need for a liver transplant.

"I basically had the choice of doing nothing and having this kill me in 10 years or I could change my lifestyle and reverse it," says Leigh.



Dr. Stephen Wong, a liver specialist at the University of Manitoba, recruited Leigh for a study that was looking at ways to help fatty liver disease patients, including practical solutions to increase their activity levels.

"We began by surveying 148 patients to find out what they knew about fatty liver disease, how they had tried to manage it and what they thought would help them," says Dr. Wong. "Having access to a fitness trainer and an exercise group were two of the top ten most requested options."

Dr. Wong and his team partnered with local community resources including the City of Winnipeg pools and some local gyms to provide free passes for patients. But it was watching his own children play active games on their Xbox Kinect (which doesn't require using a controller) that gave him the idea that it might work as an exercise tool.

Leigh was one of six study participants to sign up for the Xbox workouts. He came in for 35 minute workout sessions three times a week for two months using an Xbox Kinect which got him moving. He soon found activities that he enjoyed, like biking and swimming, to keep the momentum going.

"The first thing you have to realize is that you do have the time in the day to exercise, even if you don't think you do," says Leigh. "Using the Xbox program taught me how to do the moves properly and later I started going to the gym myself."

Now 100 lbs lighter, working out regularly and eating healthy, Leigh has successfully eliminated the excess fat from his liver. He has enjoyed his new healthier lifestyle so much that he has continued to increase his exercise and now participates in triathlons. He is even looking forward to taking on the Wisconsin Ironman with his family cheering him on.

“If you told the Leigh from 3 years ago that he’d one day be doing triathlons, he would have said ‘how??’” laughs Leigh.

For his part, Dr. Wong is very proud of his ‘star pupil’.

“Fatty liver disease is on the rise and will soon be the number one liver problem in Canada,” says Dr. Wong. “Without any effective medications, the best treatment is gradual weight reduction through healthy eating and exercise. Our study showed that providing guidance, support, and finding unique new programs that are interesting to fatty liver patients can help give them that little push that they need to get started. But it’s up to them to keep the momentum going.

“Leigh’s journey with fatty liver disease has shown that people can be successful in reversing this common liver condition,” says Dr. Wong. “His success through hard work and dedication was inspirational, and will no doubt help others begin their own success story with fatty liver disease.”

When asked what advice he might give to others facing fatty liver disease who want to make the same lifestyle changes, Leigh responds, “Don’t think of it as a battle. Whether it’s changing what you eat or trying a new activity, find a way to enjoy it so you’ll stick with it. Soon enough, you’ll find that you’re looking forward to that healthy meal or that work out and it will be something that you ‘want’ to do versus something you ‘have’ to do.”



Leigh before the study

Leigh after his lifestyle changes