

Positively Breathtaking

It's never too late to stop smoking and start exercising. Just ask this Monmouth County man, whose pulmonary illness has surprisingly led him back to wellness.

Russell Shay, 60, knew it was time to quit his 37-year smoking habit when the simplest of daily activities left him gasping for air. Six months after kicking his habit, however, he was still short of breath and extremely tired. "I had to take naps regularly to get through my day," Russell remembers.

An exercise stress test revealed that Russell suffered from chronic bronchitis and that "he was breathing at only 51 percent of his capacity," reports Gustavo De La Luz, M.D., a board-certified pulmonologist on staff at Ocean Medical Center. "I never asked Dr. De La Luz whether smoking caused my bronchitis, because I didn't want to know. But deep in my heart, I think I know the answer," Russell confides.

With the bad news also came good news: Russell's condition would not impact his ability to exercise, so

pulmonary rehabilitation was prescribed as the optimal treatment to improve his quality of life.

Customized Treatment

"The goal of pulmonary rehabilitation is to get patients well enough to do the things they've always done,"

Dr. De La Luz clarifies. "The program is about a lot more than just exercise. It's about education, dedication, and the psychological aspects of getting beyond this illness. And the nice thing about the rehabilitation is that there are no negative side effects."

Convenience was another plus, for Russell found that Ocean Medical Center's Pulmonary Rehabilitation Department, a component of Meridian Life Fitness and Rehabilitation — just a hop, skip, and a jump away from his home — was fully equipped with everything he would need.

The department's multi-disciplinary team set to work by establishing personal goals with Russell that he would have to achieve to graduate from the rehab program. These goals included dancing the jitterbug, walking all 18 holes of a golf course, swimming laps in the pool, even taking out the garbage. Next, the staff developed a customized exercise plan that would improve Russell's breathing and thus make his goals attainable. And the first step toward restoring his lung capacity was walking on a treadmill.

Stepping It Up

The treadmill was slow-going at first. Despite the untiring support and encouragement from his team and his three-times-per-week schedule, Russell's sessions proceeded at less than 1 mile per hour, with no incline. Over time, though, he began to see the exercise pay off, and this energized him to keep moving forward: "With every day of exercise, breathing was becoming easier and easier."

By the time Russell had advanced to a pace of 2.5 miles per hour at a level 1 incline, he was sufficiently encouraged to join the hospital's "Step Up" program, which would enable him to continue with his exercise plan but remain monitored by professionals.

Cindy Feeny, RRT, CPFT, department manager, is quite proud of Russell's level of commitment. "After he graduated from his prescribed program, Russell made the voluntary decision to join Meridian Life Fitness to continue exercising," she boasts.

Taking It All in Stride

One year after starting his rehabilitation, Russell's breathing capacity has increased by an impressive 12 percent, and he's clocking in on the treadmill at close to 4 miles per hour, with a 2.5 incline. "These are the kinds of results we like to see," enthuses Dr. De La Luz.

With 60 to 80 minutes of cardiovascular workouts a day, weight lifting three times per week, and a healthy 20-pound weight loss, the things that take Russell's breath away today are the things that truly make life more enjoyable: dancing with his wife, swimming, and playing golf.


 Beth Chunn

Photo: Russ Seuffert



Russell Shay didn't have to ignore the call of the links for long once his specialized rehab team set him on a course of treatment that fitted him to a tee.