Bummer of the Week: My Bum Ankle

January 24, 2012 By Shawn Decker

Apparently I have the ankle of a senior citizen who had a serious ankle injury in their youth. On Monday morning, I got an X-ray of my problem spot- my left ankle- and the orthopedic foot and ankle specialists were pretty alarmed by what they saw. A complete lack of cartilage that is causing stress between two bones in my ankle. Fortunately, I was prepared for the news, considering that I've been limping on and off for several years now. It was the increase in pain at the end of summer that necessitated the appointment.

None of the solutions for this kind of problem applies to me. An ankle replacement is only good for about 10 to 15 years, which isn't appropriate for someone my age. Another alternative, fusing the bones, would make the ankle immobile, and I don't register the levels of pain that make this option a no-brainer for a lot of people whose bones and joints are in far worse shape. The cause of the deterioration is a lifetime of hemophilia and minor bleeding into the joint. The blood erodes the cartilage- once that's gone there's no protection in the joint. Another culprit is the adverse effect that HIV medications can have on bone density. I've been on the meds since 1999, so...

So, what do I do? Well, I can minimize pain by avoiding super long walks, accepting the generous amounts of available wheelchairs in airports, giving up tennis (even triples play with friends, one of my favorite summer activities) and bowling. And no more hopping around on stage during Synthetic Division shows. I plan to keep my weight reasonable by using the exercise bike at the gym. In terms of the pain, one thing that has helped out is the strap-on that I started wearing last fall... a strap-on ankle brace, folks. Minds out of the gutter, please. Mainly, I need to ice up and stay off of the ankle when it starts hurting.

The strategy in doing all of these things is to bide my time until science catches up. One of the specialists, a guy around my age, said that labs are working diligently in the hopes of discovering a way to regrow cartilage. He estimated that this could be available in 10 years time. Both he and the doctor agreed that I should basically do nothing at this point. I am on board to take the ankle issue seriously, and have it last until the day that science bails me out.

Is it a tough pill to swallow? Not yet. I guess part of my journey has been dealing with medical news. Bad news. I'm sure it's going to be frustrating when the ankle prevents me from doing something I really want to do. That undoubtedly will happen, and the temptation will be there to

press on and just deal with the pain afterward. The problem is getting into a bad routine- if I do that enough times then I could really do more damage. And, in a way, I've already done that. The ankle has been hurting *for years* now. Hell, it hurt so bad a few years ago that I hailed a cab halfway through the AIDS Walk in NYC. I think my shirt even said, "Limpin' Ain't Easy" that year.

I'm cool with the plan. I'm at peace with how much I've been able to do with this ankle. It's helped me kick HIV's ass. It's taken me places I never imagined I'd go, and now I need to show my thanks by giving it a much-needed rest.

Positively Yours,
Shawn

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