Miami doctor back to active lifestyle after unique minimally invasive spine surgery

“Today, there is nothing that I can’t do...back to normal,” Alex reflects after spine surgery.

Alex, a successful chiropractor and has spent years helping others with musculoskeletal conditions return to activity. On Christmas Day in 2010, while trying to save a man from drowning, Alex was injured. Only, he didn’t realize at the time the severity of his injury.

Not long after the injury, Alex started having mild pain in his middle back along with numbness and tingling that radiated down into his right leg. At first, he figured his symptoms would go away after a little rest. Unfortunately, instead of getting better, the numbness and tingling worsened. Alex made an appointment with an orthopedic specialist and an MRI of his lumbar spine was ordered. The MRI results came back clear. A brain MRI also showed normal results.

Alex decided to give his symptoms a little more time and tried nonsurgical care for relief. He took anti-inflammatories to help relieve his back pain. Alex also tried some specialized exercises to help relieve the numbness he was experiencing.

His back pain and neurological symptoms continued. Alex noticed increased weakness into his right leg and had lost nearly two inches of muscle mass. Normal activities, such as working and helping care for his children, were becoming difficult because of his condition. Recreational activities that Alex enjoys, such as Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu and running, were impossible.

Alex knows many physicians, surgeons and specialists because of his occupation. He was referred to an orthopedic surgeon who specializes in spine. Alex made an appointment with the surgeon and an MRI of his thoracic spine revealed that he had a large herniated disc. The surgeon explained to Alex that a complex thoracic spine surgery would be necessary. “He looked at me and told me I needed to see Dr. John Regan at Spine Group Beverly Hills,” Alex reflects.

Dr. Regan is a fellowship-trained orthopedic spine surgeon and a pioneer in the use of Video Assisted Thoracic Spine Surgery (VATS). VATS is a minimally invasive (keyhole) surgical procedure. It allows the surgeon to directly examine the chest cavity without a big incision. Three or four small incisions are made to allow the surgeon to use the special instruments (video camera and endoscope) needed for this operation. During the procedure, a very small video camera is used to project pictures of the chest cavity onto a screen.

Because Alex lives in Miami and Dr. Regan is located in Beverly Hills, his first consult with Dr. Regan was on the phone. Dr. Regan viewed Alex’s MRI and discussed with him in detail the thoracic spine surgery necessary to repair the herniation. Alex knew he couldn’t continue to live with his symptoms and needed to return to work. He scheduled the surgery with Dr. Regan and made travel arrangements.

Dr. Regan performed the video assisted thoracic surgery in March of 2011. Alex felt immediate relief from his back pain and his numbness was improved. Though recovery from surgery was not easy, he gradually introduced activity back into his life. He started with walking for short periods and increased his distance gradually. At the same time, his leg numbness continued to improve and now Alex has full relief from all numbness and tingling.

Today, Alex has returned full-time to his busy chiropractic practice. He is free to enjoy an active life with his wife and three children. The family enjoyed an outing at Disney World and went skiing the winter following his surgery.

Update 2013: “I wanted you to know that I feel amazing! Better than ever. It’s funny that I know you don't realize the effect that you have on lives because it happens to me all the time with my patients. I will tell you that I think of you often and what you were able to do for me. I have absolutely no symptoms and I am able to do anything and everything (minus jiujitsu, that’s forever done!),” Alex writes. Above are photos showing Alex back in action 2 years following his thoracic spine surgery. “The box jump by the way is 52”, not bad for a guy who was unable to lift his leg at one point!”

Dr. Regan was one of the first spine surgeons in the world to utilize the surgical technique called Video-Assisted Thoracic Spine Surgery (VATS), which involves the use of laparoscopic surgical instruments through a few small incisions, aided by tiny cameras and a video monitor.