

Surfer's Myelopathy Video Transcript

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Narrator: Surfing is a very popular sport (especially in places like Hawaii). Most of the time, surfing is an exciting and fun sport, but sometimes it can go wrong.

Brandon: I was surfing, I stood up on my surfboard, and I felt a slight pop in my lower back.

That pop caused sharp pain-- which I later learned was the beginning of Surfer's Myelopathy.

Narrator: I talked with Dr. Stacy Brown, neurointensivist and director of neuroscience research at the Queen's Medical Center in Honolulu, Hawaii (an expert on Surfer's Myelopathy).

Dr. Brown: Surfer's Myelopathy is a rare (but potentially serious) non-traumatic injury to the spinal cord that primarily affects first-time surfers.

Narrator: This is Brandon and he was diagnosed with Surfer's Myelopathy.

Brandon: My incident occurred over the summer of 2021 while I was surfing.

After initially feeling that pain, which felt similar to as though you lift something too heavy, I swam back to the beach and laid down on the sand-- where the pain subsided, and eventually, I lost all feeling in everything below my waist.

Dr. Brown: Surfer's myelopathy is considered rare-- because over the last 20 years, less than 100 cases have been described in the medical literature.

Narrator: I asked her... "What are some of the causes of surfers myelopathy?"

Dr. Brown: The cause notably has nothing to do with trauma or impact sustained during surfing.

Our leading theory is that it has to do with the position that beginner surfers take. So, belly down on the surfboard with your back very arched for a prolonged amount of time. And, this position can cause interruptions to the normal blood flow supplied to the spinal cord.

The same injury can happen in other sports. For example, very similar injuries have been seen in sports like gymnastics or horseback riding.

Narrator: I asked Dr. Brown: "What are the symptoms of Surfer's Myelopathy?"

Dr. Brown: The first symptoms usually include back pain and tingling in the legs.

Then, this can progress over the next several hours to weakness of the legs (as well as probably problems with urinating).

Brandon: Initially, it felt like a sharp pain in my lower back-- as though I'd lifted something too heavy,

But, eventually the pain subsided, and I felt nothing from my waist down.

Narrator: There are multiple treatments that the doctors do to help.

Dr. Brown: Treatment strategies are aimed at two main goals. One is identifying any structural impediments to blood flow to the spinal cord.

And two, boosting the overall profusion or blood flow to the spinal cord using pressures in and around the spinal cord.

Then, after this initial period, the treatment strategies really focus on physical therapy and rehabilitation.

Narrator: If you don't have a full recovery, you would go to a rehab center.

So, how would you choose a rehab center, and what should you expect?

Brandon: I went to Shepherd's Center in Atlanta, Georgia. And, I chose it for its adolescent program-- which focused on young adults who experienced spinal cord injuries.

At the rehab center, I did a lot of strengthening, learning... day-to-day living skills-- and through the specifically adolescent program, I was able to interact with other people around my age and trade stories about our experiences, and our shared struggles.

The best advice I would give for someone in the rehab center right now is to really embrace the challenge of learning new skills-- including wheelies... so you can get over uneven terrain and off curbs, and transferring from the floor to your chair (in case you ever fall).

Narrator: After coming home, you have to adapt to many things.

Brandon: The hardest part of coming back from the rehab center with the disability was just getting over the initial embarrassment of feeling different, and just standing out a bit more.

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Dr. Brown: Educate yourself on the challenges that your loved one is going through. Have patience, and be open to just listening.

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Brandon: To any people who are also going through something similar, I would highly advise that you try and tackle the social side of things first because having a strong support network is so very important to recovery.

Dr. Brown: People with spinal cord injury can go on to live full lives, pursue their career goals, hobbies, and adapted sports. They can build community and form really strong relationships.

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Narrator: Even though Surfer's Myelopathy is very rare, it's life-changing, and you can still have an active, productive life.

We hope you find this video and website helpful in understanding what Surfer's Myelopathy is.

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