

Recovering from Multiple Spinal Fusions

Amanda McKinney and Erin Myers – Nashville, Tennessee

At six years old Amanda McKinney was diagnosed with degenerative scoliosis. From the age of eight she wore a brace 24 hours a day until she was 15. Between the ages of 15 and 24 she had four major surgical fusions as her back continued to degenerate.

Her third fusion procedure was an anterior lumbar interbody fusion (ALIF), where doctors enter the body through the left side of the belly button, push the abdominal muscles, stomach and aorta to the side to create a clear path to the spine, and then place an insert called a cage into the disc space along with plates and screws. The cage helps restore the normal spacing in between the vertebrae, alleviating pressure on the nerve roots.



Yeah, ouch.

The recovery time is intense and long for these types of surgeries. And time was not something Amanda had a lot of. As a neo-natal ICU nurse and a member of the bereavement team at The Children's Hospital at TriStar Centennial Medical Center in Nashville, TN, Amanda had to initially delay taking the job not once but twice due to her earlier procedures, then had to take a month off after getting the job for recovery from the ALIF. Now, after another surgery to remove the hardware from the previous spinal fusion, she was told she needed additional recovery time.

"I had missed so much work already, I had to return to my job before I fully

recovered or lose it," she says. "I did not know what to do."

Enter Pilates. Through friends of her mother she eventually connected with Pilates and Erin Myers, a Master Instructor with Balanced Body and creator of Spiral Spine, a digital repository of resources designed to assist the scoliosis community.

Getting her back to work...

"Amanda's body was daunting at first," says Erin. "Her spinal muscles had been devascularized. Her rectus abdominis had been pulled apart, and 2" of 5 ribs had been cut out. I decided to focus on getting her legs strong using the Reformer as they were largely unaffected by the surgeries. Although I knew her back would hurt after work at the hospital every day initially, I knew I could get her legs to carry her throughout the day so she wouldn't lose her job."

"When I started on the Reformer I just got my butt kicked, but I was getting stronger," says Amanda. "I was able to get back to work on time, but now that I was there, I had to stay strong for the parents of the neonates I was working with. It's a terrible and frightening time for them and I couldn't let them see I was physically hurting, which is hard to do when you are on your feet for 12-hour shifts."

So Amanda and Erin worked on non-intrusive ways to keep her out of pain. Like stretches she could do sitting in a chair when she was talking with patients in their rooms, which gave her legs a rest, and most importantly didn't look like she was stretching. Amanda also started keeping a pinky ball and roller stick in her locker. Every hour she would roll her legs.

What the future holds...

That was in 2015. Amanda is now working in the Neonatal ICU, Pediatric ICU and the pediatrics floor, and is the



head of the bereavement team at the hospital, a challenging job she truly loves. Amanda and Erin still work together, seeing slow but continuous results. "I think of Amanda's body as an onion. Every month or so I decide it's time to peel off another layer and tackle a new task," says Erin. "The closer we get to the center of the onion the more freely I see Amanda in her body. It's amazing and keeps my passion burning to help the scoliosis community throughout the world."

"I'm still in pain but I'm doing a lot better," says Amanda. "I have an IQ Reformer at my house that I work on almost every day. I'm still working my three weekly 12-hour shifts, and I start school at Vanderbilt this fall to become a pediatric nurse practitioner."

Amanda's goal is to enter the relatively new field of pediatric pain management. "When I was young and in pain, I had to go to an adult specialist. There was no one for a child to turn to. So while it's a new specialty it is a very real issue. I look forward to being able to help children who are in pain like I was, and still am to a degree."

Learn more about scoliosis and the Spiral Spine at www.spiralspine.com.

Learn more about the Children's Hospital at TriStar Centennial Medical Center at www.thechildrenshospitalnashville.com.