After Receiving a Life-Saving Stem Cell Transplant, This Runner Aims to Raise Money for Medical Research

He continues to clock half marathons, with each mile dedicated to giving back.

BY JENNIFER ACKER JUL 18, 2023

When Peter Kirk finally returned home from the hospital in June of 2021—and was alone in his apartment for the first time; his children at school, his wife out walking the dog—he decided he could walk from the couch to the refrigerator to get a Gatorade. With all his strength he opened the fridge door and reached for a drink. He took a few deep breaths and twisted the cap again, and again, to no avail. It was too difficult to open, and so he put the unopened drink back into the refrigerator and made his way back to the couch.

A few weeks prior, Kirk had undergone a stem cell transplant, also called a bone marrow transplant—a procedure where healthy donor cells are given to a blood cancer patient to replace diseased ones—at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York City.

Reaching a Cancer Diagnosis

In 2001, when Kirk was 35 years old and living in London, he decided to get an annoying hip pain checked out. The subsequent blood test from that appointment revealed his neutropenia diagnosis, which is a condition in which you have lower than normal levels neutrophils, a type of white blood cell that your bone marrow makes, according to the Mayo Clinic.

Kirk didn't pay too much attention to this condition until a few years later, in 2007, when a hematologist warned him that neutropenia was a precursor to acute myeloid leukemia, a cancer of the blood and bone marrow. That doctor also told him he had a 10% to 20% increased lifetime risk of developing the aggressive blood cancer.

So when Kirk and his family moved to New York City in 2010, he found a hematologist in the city to keep an eye on his neutropenia. Things went along normally for the next decade until he thought he had food poisoning or a bad virus in October 2020. Because he had been throwing up for four days, he decided to contact his hematologist. After seeing Kirk's blood work, his doctor called an ambulance to get him to the emergency room.

The Road That Led to a Stem Cell Transplant

Kirk's blood work had revealed he had developed acute myeloid leukemia, the blood cancer his doctor was originally worried about. Within 48 hours of being in the ER, his condition rapidly deteriorated; he was transferred to the intensive care unit and intubated. On top of the leukemia diagnosis, doctors quickly realized Kirk had double-lung pneumonia and could no longer breath on his own.

Doctors warned his wife, Torun Kirk, that he may not survive another 24 hours. "At one point, the lead pulmonologist in the NYU ICU told my wife, 'nothing seems to be working so we are basically throwing everything we've got at him,'" Kirk says.

While intubated, hematologists were arguing that Kirk needed to start chemotherapy immediately for survival, even if it made the drugs for his lungs less effective. So Torun made the decision for her husband to begin chemotherapy.

The day after Kirk began chemo, his wife was told to spend as much time as possible with him. But he very slowly showed signs of improvement. After 16 days in the ICU, doctors transferred Kirk to a regular room where he would stay for another two weeks. He recalls this time as hazy and uncertain if he'd have a future.

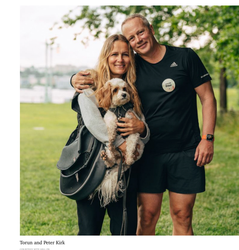
Once released, Kirk spent the next five months receiving chemotherapy to treat the leukemia. During those rounds of chemotherapy, Kirk lost 35 pounds and referred to himself as a shadow of who he once was. He writes in his blog, "I was a man with five marathons under my belt, and before my diagnosis in fairly decent shape for a 50-year-old. Before the diagnosis, I could at any given time go out and run three to six miles on a whim. I decided to try to run across the street—100 feet. I couldn't. It simply wasn't doable."

Finally Receiving Good News

At the completion of his five months of chemotherapy, Kirk found out he was in cancer remission. But he still received some bad news: Doctors told Kirk that there was a high likelihood that the leukemia would return somedays because of his neutropenia, and if and when it did, the therapies that worked this time, wouldn't necessarily work so well a second time.

But the doctors had options for Kirk, and told him he qualified for a stem cell transplant, which could cure his leukemia and his neutropenia for good. The procedure, seemingly anticlimactic once it happens, requires high doses of chemotherapy and isolation prior to the operation to kill all the damaged blood cells.

"They chemo the living daylights out of you for 10 days to kill all your own stem cells in your bone marrow," Kirk says, recalling days leading up to and after the stem cell transplant as some of his worst days, when his only goal was to move from the bed to the chair four feet away once a day.



Torun and Peter Kirk
COURTESY PETER KIRK

After Cancer, a New Goal

When Kirk finally returned home and had all those hours to rest, think, and begin to recover, an idea came to him. He would start running.

It had only been eight weeks since the transplant, but Kirk made a deal with himself: He would run for as long as he could and stop when he needed.

On his first day of running, Kirk made it 200 meters and then stopped. He recalls at first being disappointed he didn't make it at least a half mile, but then reminded himself that he had just survived a transplant, beat an aggressive blood cancer, and has a family. The running will come in time, he told himself.

Back in his apartment after that first run, Kirk googled the New York City Marathon and decided he would run it for Memorial Sloan Kettering's charity, Fred's Team. It was a big goal, as he says he had just 12 weeks to go from 200 meters to 42,200 meters. "The hardest part was getting from 200 meters to one mile," Kirk says. "My marathon training runs consisted of 23 training runs total, where the first five runs were 200 meters, and the first 10 were no more than a mile."

Those early runs were more than marathon training, they were about Kirk fighting his way out of being a cancer patient and not letting cancer control his life. On Kirk's 10th run he finally hit the coveted one mile mark—a major milestone for the man who doctors believed at one time had less than 24 hours to live.

Still recovering from the stem cell transplant, when Kirk increased his distance to five miles he decided he would only run one time a week to give his body time to rest and recover. But each week, he would add two more miles than the previous week.

"One time, I felt like the Statue of Liberty spoke to me on a long run about all the immigrants and how hard they fought to come here and be here and of course I can keep running," he says. On another training run he recalled how tired he felt, but how much better it was to be outside running than lying in a hospital bed.

Running the New York City Marathon

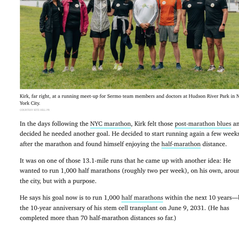
On the day of the New York City Marathon, five months after his transplant, Kirk crossed the finish line in 5:39. "I ran the entire marathon, except I walked up the first half of the Queensboro Bridge as it seemed so steep to me and I wanted to conserve my energy for the remaining ten miles—I hadn't run any elevation on any of my training runs so thought it was smart for me to walk up that bridge."

The day prior he had his blood checked and kept the hospital bracelet on for the race. As he crossed the finish line, he ripped it off—a symbol of a beginning and an end. The end of his cancer journey; the beginning of something he didn't yet realize.

"For me it wasn't about running the marathon, it was about proving I wasn't beholden to cancer, to the hospital, and wasn't a patient with a terminal illness," Kirk says.

Kirk acknowledges he had great care, but that his healing is also about determination, and fighting past the difficult moments. "Find your optimism, your purpose, your motivation, and set small goals for yourself that are in the direction of forward," he says.

Another Idea After the Marathon



Kirk, far right, at a running meet-up for Sermo team members and doctors at Hudson River Park in New York City
COURTESY PETER KIRK

In the days following the NYC marathon, Kirk felt those post-marathon blues and decided he needed another goal. He decided to start running again a few weeks after the marathon and found himself enjoying the half-marathon distance.

It was on one of those 13.1-mile runs that he came up with another idea: He wanted to run 1,000 half marathons (roughly two per week), on his own, around the city, but with a purpose.

He says his goal now is to run 1,000 half marathons within the next 10 years—by the 10-year anniversary of his stem cell transplant on June 9, 2031. (He has completed more than 70 half-marathon distances so far.)

This year, on June 12, a year after Kirk's life-saving transplant, more than 2,000 physicians registered to run virtually with Peter and support his cause to raise money for medical research. From those donations, Kirk's company, Sermo, a social network platform for physicians, made a $250,000 donation to various medical research causes chosen by the participating physicians.

The top five recipients of the donations included the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, American Heart Association, St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital, Global Solutions for Infectious Diseases, and the Prostate Cancer Foundation.

Run with Peter will become an annual event each year on the anniversary of his new life. And Kirk will soon be announcing his foundation that will serve as the overarching umbrella for Run with Peter and other initiatives that raise money for medical research and inspire others to achieve their goals.

To support Kirk's mission of raising money for medical research, donate to Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center or the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society.

JENNIFER ACKER
JENNIFER ACKER JOINED THE EDITORIAL STAFF OF RUNNER'S WORLD AND BICYCLING IN JANUARY 2022.