

Reggie's Story

- [Disclaimer] The purpose of this story is to offer Kaiser Permanente members who are considering or have already had metabolic and bariatric surgery an opportunity to learn from one another's real experiences. Please note the contents of these stories are for informational purposes only and not medical advice. Please consult your health care team for any questions you have related to your individual medical condition.
- [Interviewer] Hi Reggie! Thanks for sharing your story with us today. Feel free to tell us a little bit about your journey with metabolic and bariatric surgery.
- [Reggie] Yes, again, my name is Reggie. On July 12th of 2012, I had some medical issues that dealt with my heart. And they told me that I was having heart this, heart that... and I went through the process, and that was OK, I dealt with it mentally. And then later on, probably in March or April, they told me that I was a prediabetic, and I was like well, in my eyes, you're not prediabetic, you either are or you aren't. So that prompted me to look into weight loss surgery. I had looked into it numerous years before when the lap band was real popular and that did not really interest me. I just didn't like...I wasn't ready, that's what it was. So, I went to the classes and I was really astonished by the information that was available out there, but if you're not going to partake in it, then it's this...you have to find it. You know, you never have a chance to use it. And before I went into the program, I thought of this passage that I heard years and years and years ago, and it says if your mind is like a parachute, it works best when it's open. And so that's how I went into this, with an open mind. I wanted to learn as much as I could what was being offered to help me have a second chance at a better, more healthful, healthier life.
- And so, I did, and on October 6, 2014, is when I had the surgery, and I opted for the sleeve. Because of allergies and certain likes and dislikes for a lot of different foods, I felt that for me, personally, the sleeve would be more conducive to me because what I could eat, I just would eat less of. And I was OK with that; I really, truly was.
- Traditionally, I was a big eater. I've always, I've been blessed to have had my mom, aunts, even uncles, and my wife are all outstanding cooks and I just.... My motto was, basically, was eat all I could, and it reflected. At my heaviest I was like 370. And by the time I kind of was ready for the surgery and went

with the program, I had lost...I was down, I think, in the 330s, or something like that. Now, in saying that, a lot of people can get false hope in, well, you know I can lose it on my own. Maybe you can, chances are you won't, because I didn't. You know I was under the impression that yeah, I could do it on my own, but it didn't work.

So, with the help that I received, I was able to have the surgery. I had the sleeve, and at my lowest I went down to the low 250s, high 240s. And it's funny because when people would see you, first thing they would ask is, "Are you OK? Are you sick?" Because I had lost the weight and people don't realize the amount of difference losing weight has on your body, how it impacts it.

We live in a two-story and 13 steps coming up. And pre-op, it was a labor coming up sometimes. And coming down in the morning, I sounded like microwave popcorn and I'm thinking, "Well, if I fall, I hope I land over here because it's close to the pillows." And maybe I would just bump my head and be able to go from there, but.... After I lost the weight, it was going up and down, it was an afterthought.

I know one of the biggest fears that I had when I was heavy was an embarrassing moment would have been if I were to drop my keys. That could have caused a decade of terror, hoping that I wouldn't split my pants. And of course, you would never do it in the confines of your house, you would always do it out in public. So, I was glad that never happened. But my point of view and how I looked at it was this gave me a second chance at life. It was a situation to where I could be more in control, at least intellectually, of what I needed to do to maintain this versus just going at it willy-nilly and rolling your dice.

How it has impacted me is like, before, we would go out to dinner; I'd order my meal, and my wife, she would order hers. She wouldn't eat all hers and I would eat mine and hers. And now the difference is we would go out and share a meal. And if we didn't do that, and we bought, I mean, had different items on the menu, one of the first things I would do is after I ordered, I would then ask for to-go boxes because I wasn't gonna eat it all. You know how before I could go to a buffet and—I wasn't like the Klumps—but I did...they lost money on me. But now I don't even go to buffets because it's a waste of money; I can't eat that much. I don't want to eat that much.

And my wife and I are RVers, and we travel across the country. One of the things that I didn't think of is when you're in a time zone difference how it will affect you. An example would be, we usually have dinner between 5:00 and 5:30. Well, on the East Coast, you know that's 2:00, 2:30, so it's like a little late lunch. But then your body is used to eating at its regular time, so then you'd end up eating again, 8:00, 8:30, a little something light. But I try not to eat after 7:00. So, what it is, is a whole new change of attitude, your focus is different.

I tell people who have been on the fence, wondering if this is something that they should do for themselves, is I always say that, in my opinion, the worst-case scenario is you would be healthier than you were before. The best-case scenario would be that you would get down to your desired weight and you would do all of the things that you envisioned doing. But if you fall short of your goal, so what?

For instance, I was in the 250s and 6 months ago, or a little more, I hurt my knee. And I took a shot and I was still able to maintain my 5- to 8-mile walks. And then about 3 months ago the shot wore off. Received another shot and it doesn't do anything for me, so my knee feels like it has a toothache in my knee all the time. With this cold weather it aches, but I had dye shot into my knee. They said it wasn't torn, just cartilage loss. So that means that what I'm gonna have to do is put on my big boy panties and just deal with it, because I need to get back out there and walk to exercise.

Exercising is a vital part of your weight loss recovery. A lot of people cannot do certain things because of the weight on their knees, joints, back, what have you. But after they lose the weight, they are now able to do some of the things that they were not able to do before. And, I miss it. You get out there and you walk, and you just give thanks for, you know, being alive and seeing things. And it's almost like a community out there because you see certain people on your walk and you may have conversation, brief, in passing. And then I have walked with people that I've known, I went to high school with, and we...you know, so it makes the time goes by easier, you can talk about different things.

But, for me, the weight loss surgery gave me...saved my life, it gave me a second chance. I think that the opportunities that it presents you is all up to you. I think the explanations that I received and the information during my journey was extremely helpful. Sometimes you might have to explain to some

people almost as elementary as “See Spot Run,” but if you listen to what they’re telling you, it only makes sense. An example, I had half of my stomach or a portion of my stomach removed. So, I need to take vitamins and calcium every day to replace food or the nutrients and vitamins that I would have received with a meal. I have to take it that way so that’s...to me, that’s just a small...it’s not even a chore that you have to do. It’s just something that you incorporate into your routine and it makes sense.

And when you talk to other people who have had weight loss surgery outside of the area in which I did, I’m just shocked at the amount of—I’m not going to say disinformation—but the lack of information that they received. To me, it was almost like—I’m not going to say a weight loss bill—but it’s almost like, hey, you know, you came here to get to the weight loss surgery, we did our part, you paid us our money and peace be with you. My situation was a lot different; the support that I received from day one to even today as we speak is always available. That is a peace of mind.

And you’d be surprised the impact that it has on you, to see people that you work with, I mean side by side in situations, some of them dangerous, and nevertheless, and I saw them at maybe a retirement party after my surgery and they didn’t know who I was because I had lost that much weight.

I always laugh at as you lose weight one of your first big shopping trips is in your own closet. Clothes that you save. You know, I’ll get back or down where I can wear this or that and then when you can actually do, it can bring a smile to your face so.... I get high on life and part of living was reliving, if you will, was having the surgery. I think anyone who is contemplating the surgery, I think that the results will outweigh any concern that you have. Concerns are normal because it is a surgery. Any surgery has some concerns to it. But this is not as drastic, as all life-altering as some people make it seem.

Another situation where I was forcing it is I had support. Of course, my family when I told them at first, some members were like, “Right on! Hey man, you’re still alright.” Some others were like, “Well, you know, if you just, you know, do this, do that on your own, you really wouldn’t need the surgery.” And I said, well, they know me, and so when I basically had demonstrated that I had drawn that line in the sand, I was going to have it, they came on board.

I remember I had it, like I said, on October 6, 2014, and so the biggest test, in my mind, was, OK, Thanksgiving. But what my wife did was whatever food

item that everyone had for Thanksgiving, I had the same. It's just that mine was pureed in a blender and put in a container. And I can remember eating with my baby spoon my 4 ounces of Thanksgiving dinner. And I remember getting just as full as if I wouldn't have had the surgery, was in front of the fireplace in the recliner, watching TV, and slept for 2 hours. So, it was all-out normal, so I got past that.

And the next hurdle was we were out at a doctor's appointment. And it got delayed and it was kind of time for me to eat. So, I went to the cafeteria and got like a tuna salad sandwich or something, and I ate it. But from that time on, I would always take with me a container if I was gonna be out any length of time, something to snack on. And what it does is it reprograms you from the way you were to what you want to be.

Are you going to have relapses? Yeah, because you're human. If you eat a piece of Key lime pie or something from your past, there's no need to like get on the bridge and want to commit suicide, it's just life. The idea in the goal is not to revert back to your past on a daily basis, but it's almost like your personal reward. I've done this, I've lost this weight, I've stayed on track, path is true. And if I go to a celebration and I decide to partake in the sweets, so what? That's just life and I try not to put a lot of pressure on myself because at the end of the day, to me, is that you can tell people out there in the world anything that they want to know, anything you think they want to hear. But at the end of the day, you cannot fool that man or woman in the mirror. And if you can satisfy that reflection in the mirror, then I think you're doing alright.

[Interviewer] Thanks, Reggie. A few follow-up questions that I'd love to ask. In general, what do you wish you had known, if anything, about life after bariatric surgery before you had surgery?

[Reggie] The things that I wish I would have known would have been how you really need to be serious about it. I was, but I understand there are people that I knew who had it in different situations who weren't, and how easy it is to revert back, I guess, to old habits. Again, for me, having heart issues and then diabetes issues, that was all it took for me. Like I could do one, I could deal with it mentally. Maybe two or...but no, no. So, I tried to eliminate any outside situations. But it's easy, you don't know, like, you don't know what you don't know, and you get into it, you can talk to people, but unless you walk in their shoes. People hear but they don't listen. Or they listen and don't hear.

You can tell them what to do, how to do it, show them how to do it, but yet they still go their own way.

[Interviewer] This is kind of a similar question, but in general, maybe, what were the biggest surprises for you after bariatric surgery? Or maybe things you didn't expect?

[Reggie] Uh, there was a couple of things, you know, foods. The taste sometimes was not as like it used to be before and that had to do with maybe the way it was being prepared. For me, my changes in some food preparation began when I had my issues with my heart. I used to play sports and I could not take the concentrated salt tablets, so I would always have cramps. So I went back to the doctor and, you know, he said, "Hey, sprinkle salt on your food." And I can wake up in the morning and roll my eyes and I'm sprinkling and don't even know how it tastes. So bad habits are formed and it's hard to break, but after that particular situation, I did. But I was surprised on how the taste of some foods, the texture of it, how it tastes or changed a little bit, wasn't all bad. Things that you like, you like. So, some foods I don't like as much. Other foods, I try to eat it and enjoy it. When we go camping, I really love that what we eat, I eat until I'm satisfied. I used to eat until I was full, but I eat until I'm satisfied now, and if I get hungry, I just go get some more later.

[Interviewer] A few questions that often come up and we hear from members at Kaiser Permanente are around things like taking vitamin and mineral supplements after surgery. I would love to hear your thoughts, kind of, how was that for you? We know that's something that happens after surgery, that's something you have to do for life. Kind of overall your thoughts on vitamin and mineral supplements after surgery.

[Reggie] I am completely fine with that because in the classes they explain the reasons why that is needed and because you're not going to have the, hopefully, I'll say that again, hopefully, you don't have the same type of food intake that you had previous, that you had pre-op. It's just that it helps introducing to the body the minerals and vitamins and supplements that you did not have.

When you go through the classes and the education, one never thinks how much protein you need to have on a daily basis. You just don't think like that. You don't think, yeah, you know you're supposed to drink 64 ounces of water. But you know, and then that's when you start in your own mind, substituting—it could be alcohol, it could be anything—you're just not serious about it. Once

you become serious about it, the things like the minerals and supplements are very important.

Now since we travel as much as we could, we will go to, you know, certain national chain stores that have what we need wherever we're at, and that's another plus. Because the last thing you need is to be out in the middle of doo-wah-diddy and run out of your vitamins and this and that [laughs] and they don't have them there, and they look at you like you're crazy because they don't deal with that there, you know. I've even had some of my vitamins and whatnot overnighted to a location that we would be in Wisconsin.

So, I enjoy it! That's part of the deal. First thing I do in the morning when I get up is take my medicine and my vitamins and everything else. It's just, I don't even think about it. It's part of what I have to do to live. And for me it's like, if you're serious about it, take it. If not, then get out of the way and, you know, they'll just deal with you when they come pick you up, that's all.

[Interviewer] Another area that I think we've heard from our members is they have a lot of questions around just overall mental health and wellness. And how relationships with yourself, food, and others often change after surgery. Would love to hear your thoughts or maybe any advice you might have for folks considering surgery or those who maybe have had surgery already.

[Reggie] Well, hopefully one of the biggest areas, I think, is you need to be honest with yourself. If you have mental health concerns and issues because you...just because you have weight loss surgery, depending upon the depth of that particular issues and concerns, it may not go away. It can only be heightened.

In class, when you're in that setting and you hear other people's stories, again because it doesn't pertain to you, you don't really think about it as much. An example would be there were several ladies in the classes at several different times and their relationship turned negative after they lost weight because their significant other couldn't handle the fact that they're not what they used to be. Or if they went in their closet and now able to wear clothing that they had not worn for years, their mental state was breaking down before the relationship. So, you don't think about that because it doesn't affect you.

For me personally, I've always played sports, I worked in law enforcement. I've had to be in some situations that were literally and figuratively life and death, so for me, I feel that I'm strong enough mentally to have gone through this without questioning the reason why. If you know that—again, if you're

honest with that person in the mirror—the reason I'm doing this is real simple. I have health issues that I need to address. And this is one of the best ways to do that, and that's what I did.

But there are real concerns of mental health for different people. And they should...I believe that certain medical organizations have hotlines for people to call in when they have situations that trouble them, and that is a good outlet. I'm fortunate that I have, you know, my bride and I have been married, in April it will be 50 years, so I have that support. I have kids, grandkids, great grandkids, and friends. And I had a friend tell me about a year or two ago that I was one of the only people that he knew that had had surgery who did not gain all of their weight back. And again, I don't think about that because I'm just so happy, you know, giddy with myself that I'm doing what I have to do that—it's not that I had on blinders— but it's just that other situations, unless it's brought to your attention, you really don't...I don't think about it. But mental health is an ongoing situation that needs to be addressed, seriously.

[Interviewer] We know with surgery there's always possible complications and side effects, and one of the things that we hear often after bariatric surgery is concern around excess skin. And just would love to hear your thoughts, of your relationship with that and how you dealt with it and/or how it affected you.

[Reggie] Well, I'm fortunate that I really don't have excess skin. I know some people that do. As with any type of surgery, and I don't want it to sound cavalier, but in effect, every day we roll our dice. And hopefully, that as you started to lose weight and used the activities, physical activities that were included, will help, kind of, tighten your body up. Just depends upon, you know, if you know the muscle structure about how it's easier for one gender to lose weight from the other, because fat is on the inside of the muscle tissue versus one is on the outside, all those different types of things. The more information you have about the total situation, not just the surgery, but pre-op as well as post-op, the better informed you are.

I don't know if staff can say this person that walked through the door, because of your current weight versus where you should be depending upon the type of surgery that you choose, you are more apt to have skin, you know, problems, excess skin or not. I don't know if it's that defined because for the longest, I've never even had...I remember I went to three different doctors, or asked three different physicians, what my weight should be—I'm 6' 1"—I've had three different answers. You know, this is way back in the day, oh, you

should, 220 is the perfect weight for you, 230, blah blah blah. I can hold it because I have a big bone structure but that's not what I wanted to do. So, there's a lot of, a lot of this, well, a lot of decisions that people need to, or thought they need to put into... If they have questions, write down questions. Go old school, get a piece of paper and anything that you can think of—good, bad, or indifferent—write it down. And then you talk to the medical people, let them answer and/or address your concerns, and then go from there. People sometimes make it more complicated than it should be.

[Interviewer] You've kind of already touched on this, but would love to hear your thoughts around physical activity, especially after surgery. If you could give someone advice who's considering surgery, or maybe has already had it, about physical activity and movement after surgery, what would that be?

[Reggie] I would say that that would, they go hand in hand. For instance, besides my routine that I need to get back into, it just felt good to get out there and do it because I couldn't have done it before.

One of the things that we like to do, we're on this national park kick. We want to see all the national parks in the United States, and we've seen quite a few. But you know to get there, there is walking involved in that. Trust me, before I couldn't have walked, even though the paths are really level on some of them, or you have one like a beginner trail or intermediate or etc., etc. The mere thought of even doing it was not appealing to me before, but now I look forward to getting out there and to walk around and to do different things.

Before, if I could have [laughs], I would have drove in the supermarket and just drove down the aisles and get what I wanted to get. But now I don't mind parking further away to get into it. I have Fitbits and those types of things to count my steps. It's a personal goal to get my 10,000 steps in. Feel like it's an accomplishment when I do. A lot of times when you're walking and talking with someone, it goes by quicker. There's things you can talk about that it's just...you're walking and talking, you know? But it is really vital because I've gained some weight because I haven't been able to walk and so that's why I think it is important, if you can, to keep it moving forward. But again, like I said, I'm not, I don't want to take shots the rest of my life. I really don't want to be dependent on a knee brace. But if that's what I have to do in order to get back out there and make it work for me, so be it. It's important to walk. I know how good it makes me feel, both physically and mentally. And [laughs] there used to be this saying, “wanna play ball with no gain without pain.” And if I

have to hurt a little bit to get back out there, then I just gotta put on my big boy panties and do it.

[Interviewer] Thanks, Reggie. Any final thoughts that you'd like to share today about your story with metabolic and bariatric surgery or just any advice you'd like to give to someone who's considering it?

[Reggie] What I would seriously advise is to sit down and have, maybe for the first time, the most honest and true conversation with yourself. If you were able on your own to receive the desired results, then you wouldn't even be contemplating weight loss surgery. If you choose that as a viable, safe option, then what it does is, in my opinion, opens up new chapters in your particular book of life—situations, activities—that may not have been an option because of how you saw yourself, or your physical limitations could be improved, if not removed.

For me, I view it as a second chance in life. I view it as it saved my life and so I highly recommend it. But I recommend that one gets as much education, pre-op, as possible. Go with a program that offers information, direction, or have availability of outsource to answer the questions that you have. Because I'm old school and, for me, the thought of having surgery—and I can just remember back at that time, when you had, like a knee surgery. I remember a friend of mine we were playing ball, he hurt his knee and they literally almost cut him from the bottom of his foot all the way up. I used to like to tell him, all the way up to his watermelon head, 'cause I always used to tease him. And they referred to it as railroad tracks. Well, I was going to, you know, have my surgery and I went to a class and they had an individual there that had the surgery and we were able to ask questions. And he had had the surgery a week before the class and was back and was up and he looked good. And he just explained how it was more, you know, 4 or 5 little places that they did this and that and he was fine with that. Now let me stop here. I'm sure they told me that in the class. I'm sure it was explained, but sometimes you hear but don't listen or listen but don't hear, for whatever reason. And so, hearing him say that, it eased that whole area of concern.

Another situation that I was a little surprised, was different doctors have different methods of suggested recovery in this sense. Some of the people that I had talked with, their doctors told them that, in effect, they had to walk, if you will, I'm not going to say an obstacle course, but yet that's what it was, before they could be released. So, I had my surgery in the afternoon. That

next morning at 6 o'clock, I got up and I'm just like, you know, baby steps walking down the hall. I didn't get all that far, but I did it because my determination was, I wanted to get out of that hospital. At 9 o'clock I got up and walked further and came back. At noon, I was getting ready to get up and they came in and the doctor asked me, "If we asked you if you could walk some stairs, a flight of stairs, could you do it?" I said, "It would take me a while, but yeah, I could do it." And they said, "OK, what we want you to do is, after you eat your lunch, we're going to discharge you." That was music to my ears. The only thing I wanted to eat at that point, even though I might have been hungry, was some Jell-O. "Hey, just give me a little Jell-O, let me eat that." I only ate half of it. Let's go!

And so, it was a little surprising the different, little things like that, some of them had to do to walk more, some of them had to do this or do that, and it was not unreasonable the request that these doctors wanted you to do. But whatever it is, you have to meet them halfway, you know, unlike some people who think they know everything. Well, if you were that damn smart, you would be a physician and you could self-medicate and figure out how to do it yourself. I am not. Doctors are a hell of a lot smarter than me and I believe what they have to say. So, I just did what they had to say; there was no question. I did it because one, I want to continue life, and two, I wanted to get better.

So, for all of you out there who are entertaining the idea of weight loss surgery, I think it's the best decision that you can make for not only yourself but for your family and loved ones. I don't think after surgery you'll regret it one minute and if anything else, people will notice that big smile from ear to ear. Some people, your friends, may have more problem with you having the surgery than you will because, in their mind, they feel that you will maybe not be their friend. Or, if you can't go to the same restaurant that you used to do. You can do all of that. You may go to the same restaurant, or whatever you're going to do, your activity on that Friday or Saturday. Instead of, you know, getting the super-size of chicken wings, you may opt for a salad. Is it more important for what you eat, or is it more important for you being there as a support system for your friend?

Little things like that, you need to pick out and decide what's most important to you. And your friends may have to decide what is important to them. If you...what's...I don't know what the difference is if you went to your activity

and you decided you wanted something different on the menu, or what if you weren't hungry? That does not, hopefully, dictate the relationship.

You got to be strong in your own conviction, you got to see things would work best for you. A true friend does not discount or take anything away just because you decided to better your life. Yes, misery enjoys company, but you know what? A true friend doesn't care. I've had more compliments from my friends. What I've noticed is a lot of my friends, now they eat different. I'm not trying to say they're trying to mimic me, but they're eating more healthier. So, you never know the effect that you have on people. You always, people always looking at you for one way, one reason or another. Hopefully, it's in a better light. But my weight loss journey has been nothing but positive. There is not an iota of a second that I regret having the surgery. Could I have had it sooner? Yes, but I wasn't ready. Whatever *it* is that pushes you over that line to have it, then you're ready. For me, it was having heart issues. I had to have a pacemaker put in, and now you're going to come back and tell me I'm prediabetic? Oh, no, no, no. So that sort of made me, that was the *it* for me, and it was the best *it* that I've ever done.

[Interviewer] Thanks for sharing your story today, Reggie. Really appreciate it.

[Reggie] Yeah, well, thank you for having me on.