

*A Nebraska farmer regains his health by taking up exercise.*

By Cheryl Tevis

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Bryan Kroeker wasn't going to let the flu get him down. So after the July 2007 wheat harvest, the 48-year-old tried to ignore his mild symptoms.

"They didn't go away," the Grant, Nebraska, farmer, says. "One night I couldn't sleep, and it came to me that it could be West Nile virus."

After confirming it with his doctor on July 14, his symptoms suddenly worsened.



"It was 3 a.m. on July 18, and I asked if he was all right," his wife, Pat, says. "He said I should take him to the hospital."

After almost a week at the hospital, Pat noticed a frightening change. "The left side of his face was drooping," she says.

His temperature also spiked to 105°F. Bryan was flown to an intensive care unit at Aurora Medical Center in Colorado. By then, he also had severe headaches.

Four days later he was moved to Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital. Four days later, he was allowed to return home on the condition that he continue physical and speech therapy.

Bryan's brother, Kent, Kent's wife, Rhonda, and their son, Kasey, had done his farm work. "I had lost 25 pounds, and it had sapped my strength," Bryan says. "My brother didn't say it then, but he thought I was done farming."

During an August visit to the doctor, Bryan insisted he would harvest corn. "I made it to the combine, but I didn't have the strength to get in it," he says.

Harvest was completed, thanks to Kent and a cavalry of 15 combines operated by neighbors and friends. "They pulled out of their fields to help," Bryan says. "We appreciated so much support while I was on the road to recovery."

Winter was a daily siege of physical therapy. "We kept the house dark because light triggered headaches," Pat says.

When Bryan's insurance deductible ran out, the road to recovery still was a long haul. "I used to pass the fitness center in Grant and tell myself I was in good shape," he says. "Pat had been walking 3 miles a day, but I didn't go with her."

One day he went into the center and climbed onto the treadmill. "I started with baby steps," he says. "If I broke a sweat, it would wreck me for the day. Now I often ride my bike from home 4 miles to lift weights."

Bryan never will know why he was the one out of an estimated 150 people who develop a severe West Nile infection.

There's no vaccine, and he doesn't know if he could be re-infected. But he's aware that West Nile sometimes lingers.

He says his best defense is a good offense. "Never being so sick and so helpless again is my driving force," he says.

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