

A New Lease on Life:

Celebrating World Ostomy Day 2018

by rhea maze

Lois Fink struggled with Crohn's disease for 19 years before her doctor suggested ostomy surgery. Her response? "Absolutely not."

"I didn't really understand it but thought of it as being mutilated and believed that this was the surgery to avoid at all costs," says Fink, now a patient advocate, inspirational speaker, and author.

Ostomy surgery is a lifesaving procedure that re-routes the way stool or urine exits the body due to problems with the urinary or digestive system caused by illness, injury, or other medical conditions.

"People refer to ostomy surgery as 'the bag' which has a tremendously negative reception in our society," Fink says. She put her surgery off for two additional years and ruminated over some of the most commonly held fears while her condition worsened. "People think that they're going to have to stop being active and stay home, that they're going to smell, that intimacy won't be possible, and that they'll have to wear baggy clothes. I'm happy to say that none of this is true. Ostomy surgery gave me incredible freedom and allowed me to no longer be defined by Crohn's disease. I now wear an ostomy pouching system and am able to live a full life."

It's estimated that 725,000 to one million people of all ages are living with an ostomy nationwide. Every three years in October, communities come together to celebrate World Ostomy Day, an international event sponsored in the United States by the United Ostomy Associations of America (UOAA). This year, Oct. 6 marked World Ostomy Day.

"You've likely met a person living with an ostomy but never knew it, as modern ostomy pouches lay discreetly on the body and are odor-proof," says UOAA President Susan Burns. "People with ostomies swim, rock climb, and work every job under the sun. With proper support, care, and education people with an ostomy are capable of anything."

Ostomy patients in Northern Colorado are fortunate to have access to comprehensive education, counseling, and follow-up support through the UCHealth system.

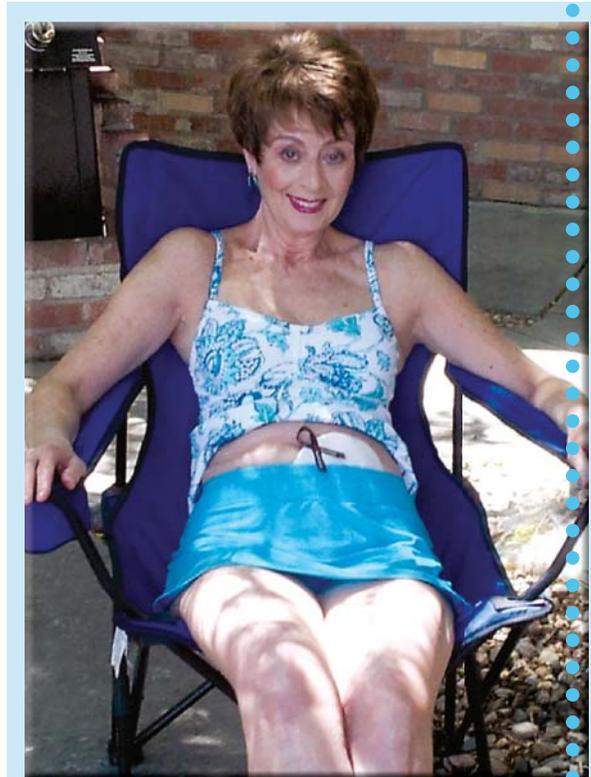
"Patients often feel scared to go home after ostomy surgery, so we try to make that

transition as smooth as possible," says Shannon Brown, a certified wound, ostomy, continence (WOC) nurse at UCHealth Poudre Valley Hospital.

Brown and her colleagues provide patients with education and counseling before their scheduled surgery, and help select an ideal surgical site. "We consider everything from clothing choices to the patient's anatomy in order to find the best possible spot that will allow them to continue to live a normal life," Brown says.

When pre-operative support is not possible due to emergency surgery or other circumstances, the WOC nurses will meet with patients as soon as they can in order to start preparing them to be as independent as possible before going home. They provide resources, information on supplies and support groups, education for family members and caregivers, and an outpatient clinic every Wednesday that gives patients continuing support after they leave the hospital.

"There's a stigma that having an ostomy limits your lifestyle, so we work hard to educate patients that it's not going to limit them," Brown says. "Once they heal from surgery, they can go back to being just as active as before. We have patients who scuba dive and run marathons—having an ostomy doesn't mean you have to stay home."



Lois Fink participates in the #GetYourBellyOut movement by sharing a picture of her ostomy pouching system.

Photo courtesy of Lois Fink

Learn more...

Resources, including over 300 support groups nationwide, information, and opportunities for getting involved with future World Ostomy Day activities can be found at ostomy.org or by calling 1-800-826-0826

Reach UCHealth Poudre Valley Hospital's WOC nurses at 970-495-8264

Connect with the Boulder County ostomy support group at bocoostomygroup.com

