

Fighting heart disease together

Lifelong friends support each other through heart surgery and cardiac rehabilitation

By Jane Claspy Nesmith,
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Terry Repstein, 56, and Bill Dawson, 57, have been friends since they attended St. Joseph's Elementary School in Marion. They both served in the Air Force, moved away from Eastern Iowa for a time and then moved back — Repstein to Amana and Dawson to Cedar Rapids. And, last year, they both underwent open heart bypass surgery just months apart.

Dawson's heart troubles came first, in December 2012. His first warning sign: He was tiring more easily during exercise.

"I just thought I was getting older, that it was just my body wearing out a bit," Dawson says. But his wife, Sue, a clinical outcomes and research nurse at Mercy Medical Center, became concerned about his heart health.

"We were working out one day and she noticed that I was turning a little gray," Dawson remembers. So, at her prodding, he made an appointment with Dr. Nicholas Hodgman, a cardiologist at Cedar Rapids Heart Center P.C., to get a baseline stress test — a test that evaluates the heart and vascular system during exercise. The results weren't conclusive, but the doctor thought "something wasn't quite right," Dawson recalls. The next diagnostic test, a cardiac catheterization, found what Dr. Hodgman had suspected.

"He had a significant blockage often known as 'a widow maker' because it is dangerous," Hodgman says. Dawson had open heart surgery the very next day.

Repstein began his heart odyssey just a few months later. One Friday in April, he went to the doctor complaining of fatigue, nausea and chest pain. After some tests, the doctor had some sobering news.

"He walked into the room and said, 'Guess what. You're having a heart attack,'" Repstein says.

Blockage in Repstein's arteries was causing an interruption of blood flow to his heart. The doctor scheduled an open heart bypass surgery for the following week.

Dawson, who was in the midst of rehab for his own heart surgery, came to the hospital to be with his friend right away.

"As soon as I entered the room, his wife said, 'I know you two are like brothers, but do you have to do everything together?'" Dawson says.

Repstein was glad to have Dawson's insights about the procedure. "He could tell me what to expect and what not to expect," Repstein says.

Dawson knew from experience that doctors would encourage his friend to get up and walk around soon after the surgery. He also remembered what was off limits for heart surgery patients: "For 60 days, you can't lift anything more than ten pounds, drive or even close a car door," he says.

Since Dawson was still completing Mercy's three-month cardiac rehabilitation program when Repstein was starting, the two went in together when their schedules allowed.

At Mercy Cardiac Rehab Center, the men both worked with a team of staff members who helped them regain physical strength after their surgery. With heart and blood pressure monitors, staff closely monitored their progress in exercise sessions on treadmills and elliptical machines three times a week. Dawson and Repstein also learned about healthful eating and good exercise habits.

Today, both men are finished with rehab and back to their normal activities — and feeling even better than before.



Photo courtesy of Mercy Medical Center

Terry Repstein, left, and Bill Dawson have been friends since their elementary school days. Recently, they supported each other through cardiac rehabilitation after having open heart surgery within months of each other.

"I have a lot more energy now than I did before the surgery," says Repstein, who is now able to spend more time on building projects. Dawson also says he has more energy, and has gotten back to his old exercise routine.

When asked if they have any advice following their ordeals, both emphasized

the need to get good preventive cardiac care.

"Just because you're getting older doesn't mean that it's OK to be tired all the time," Dawson says. Adds Repstein: "Listen to those who love you if they say you might need to see a doctor."