

# RACHEL AND MATT

## LIVING-DONOR LIVER TRANSPLANT AT UPMC



At 12 years old, Rachel Gurgiolo was focused on excelling at school and gymnastics. But her daily routine was upended when she began experiencing flu-like symptoms.

**After several tests** and multiple doctor appointments, Rachel was diagnosed with primary sclerosing cholangitis (PSC) and ulcerative colitis.

PSC is a chronic condition in which the bile ducts in the liver become inflamed and eventually blocked. Bile duct blockages can lead to liver damage and eventually liver failure.

Rachel and her family learned that she would need a liver transplant when she got older. “My doctors told me, ‘Your transplant might be in five years, 10 years, or 20 years,’” Rachel says. “It was the disease’s plan, not my plan. Sitting in a doctor’s office at 12 years old and hearing that I needed a transplant didn’t mean a lot. My focus was getting back to my daily life and catching up with schoolwork and gymnastics practice.”

### Rachel’s Journey to a Liver Transplant

Inspired by her mother’s nursing career and her own health experience, Rachel decided to pursue a medical career after high school. But during college, Rachel’s liver health worsened. The white part of her eyes appeared yellow due to jaundice. A buildup of bile salts in her body caused her skin to become extremely itchy.

“I couldn’t sleep through the night,” Rachel says. “I was waking up in the middle of the night, itching my legs until I bled. It was miserable.”

Rachel’s friends, including Matt Osborne, a fellow collegiate athlete, were very supportive.

“Matt was always someone who was there for me when I was sick in college,” Rachel says. “He was the one who would drop everything to take me to an urgent care center or to the store to get Gatorade and soup. Literally whatever I needed.”

After college, Rachel entered pharmacy school at Lake Erie College of Osteopathic Medicine. During her first year of pharmacy school, Rachel discovered she was in end-stage liver disease and needed a liver transplant.

“It was pure shock to me,” Rachel says. “Am I really this sick?” For a lot of people, there might not feel like a ‘right’ time. You just get used to feeling sick.”

Rachel scheduled a transplant evaluation at UPMC Montefiore, traveling to Pittsburgh in August 2021.

After discussing her transplant options with her doctor, Rachel decided to search for a living-liver donor. Rachel and her family started posting on social media about her need for a living donor. One of the people who heard about Rachel’s need was Matt, her friend from college.

### Matt’s Decision to be a Living Donor

After learning about Rachel’s health update, Matt wanted to help his friend in any way he could. Some of Matt’s own family members were kidney transplant recipients, so he knew how life-changing transplants could be.

Matt scheduled a living-donor evaluation appointment at UPMC Montefiore. The transplant team determined that Matt was eligible to be Rachel’s living donor, and he agreed to be her donor.

“The UPMC team really made me feel welcome and made me feel ready to do it,” Matt says. “I felt that I was in good hands when I donated.”

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## Rachel's Living-Donor Liver Transplant

Rachel was both nervous and excited when she learned that she had a living donor and a date for her transplant. She focused on the positive, applying the mindset that she had applied to gymnastics events throughout her athletic career.

"Positive thought, positive outcome," Rachel says. "That was how my gymnastics brain was trained. You have to have faith and positive thoughts that this is going to be the best thing for yourself, and this is the next step to a new lifestyle."

In November, Rachel, Matt, and their families traveled to Pittsburgh for their surgeries. On Nov. 9, 2021, Rachel received a portion of Matt's liver at UPMC Montefiore.



**IT'S REWARDING TO BE ABLE TO REFLECT MY OWN INSIGHTS TO PATIENTS.**

— Rachel Gurgiolo

## Rachel's Recovery

Soon after her transplant, Rachel noticed improvements in her health, including better sleep. Rachel's new liver lowered the buildup of bile salts in her body, helping her skin feel less itchy and improving her sleep quality.

Rachel continued her recovery at home, surrounded by the support of her family, friends, and boyfriend. She quickly jumped back into schoolwork and graduated with her pharmacy school class in May 2023.

## Rachel's Life After Her Transplant

Rachel still has "bumps in the road" after her transplant. She has had more procedures to improve the flow of blood and bile in her new liver.

But, as an athlete, Rachel is stronger and has developed more endurance than she had before her transplant. She embraces new athletic opportunities, like high-intensity interval training and strength workouts.

As a pharmacist, Rachel now works with kidney transplant patients at UPMC Hamot. She hopes that her story can be helpful for other people in the transplant community.

"I would love anyone going through something like a liver transplant to see the other side of it," Rachel says. "See that there can be not only life, but a better life after transplant. Being able to share my story is something that's very fulfilling."

***At the time of publication, Rachel Gurgiolo is employed by UPMC. Rachel's treatment and results may not be representative of all similar cases.***

## Why Choose UPMC?

People with liver disease have hope at UPMC. At UPMC, we provide transplant options to all patients who will benefit. Since 1981, our surgeons have performed more than **5,800 deceased-donor liver transplants** and more than **1,000 living-donor liver transplants**. Our skilled team of liver transplant surgeons take on some of the most complex cases.

UPMC is home to one of the oldest and largest liver transplant programs in the country. We take pride in keeping the lines of communication open with patients, families, referring physicians, and transplant case managers regarding status procedures, treatments, and follow-up care. Although transplantation is a complex, serious procedure, we maintain a personal, patient-focused approach that takes into consideration the stress and concerns many individuals experience.

## Our Liver Transplant Evaluation Clinic Locations

300 State St.  
Erie, PA 16550

### Brady Building

205 S. Front St., 8th Floor  
Harrisburg, PA 17104

### UPMC Montefiore

3459 Fifth Ave., 7 South  
Pittsburgh, PA 15213

### UPMC Northern Gastroenterology

5500 Brooktree Rd, Suite 201  
Wexford, PA 15090

### UPMC Williamsport

700 High St., 2nd Floor  
Williamsport, PA 17701

### UPMC Memorial

1703 Innovation Dr.  
York, PA 17408

**For more information about living-donor liver transplant, please visit [UPMC.com/LiverTransplant](https://UPMC.com/LiverTransplant) or call 412-647-5800**