

Lung Transplant Gives Rob Crest a New Lease on Life



On Christmas Eve, Rob Crest of Skycrest Holsteins, Athabasca, AB, underwent a life-saving lung transplant at the University of Alberta Hospital in Edmonton. After a week in the ICU, he was moved to a Post Transplant Ward where he is joined in this photo with, from left, his son Chad, daughter Katelyn and wife Sue.



There were lots of highs and lows during Rob Crest's long recovery. While the lung transplant itself was very successful, an infection in his incision and sternum bone necessitated more surgeries and over three months in hospital as doctors worked to make him better. He was finally released from the University of Alberta Hospital on April 4th.

Bonnie Cooper,
becooper2010@gmail.com

Skycrest Holsteins at Athabasca, AB, has earned great respect over the years for its high conformation, show winning herd and its hard working, passionate owners, Robert and Sue Crest and children Chad and Katelyn. In June 2022, this 3X 'Alberta Holstein Breeder of the Year' family moved into a new 140-head free-stall barn with robots where they currently milk 90 cows, and then renovated their old tie-stall barn into a calf barn. Behind the success, however, Rob had privately been dealing with a serious health issue... his lungs. "About 20 years ago, my immune system attacked my lungs and never stopped. I had scar tissue in them, and over the years it just got worse," Rob explains. Last Christmas Eve, Rob was given a new lease on life when he underwent lung transplant surgery at the University of Alberta Hospital (UAH) in Edmonton

"They wanted to do a lung transplant four or five years ago, but I wanted to keep my own parts as long as I could," relates Rob. "I put it off until it got to the point where I had to have the surgery because I wasn't getting enough oxygen and it was putting a strain on my heart." Rob was on "continual flow oxygen" for a year before his surgery and prior to that had been on a "pulse oxygen machine" for four years. "I was supposed to be on regular oxygen the last couple years, but I cheated and just did it in the house at night and wore my little pulse machine during the day because it was such an inconvenience," he says.

UAH doctors put Rob on their Lung Transplant Wait List in May 2022. "Before going on the list, I had to do two hours of physio in the UAH gym every morning for a month. They call it 'Boot Camp,'" says Rob. "We also had sessions with a social worker, dietician and other doctors as prep before the surgery," adds Sue. Rob and Sue left Skycrest every morning at 5am to make the two-hour, 150 km drive to Edmonton so they could be at the gym when it opened at 8am. By 10am, they were on their way home. "Then I would get on the tractor and go seed. I had a crop to put in," says Rob, this quiet, determined fourth generation farmer who puts in 2000 acres of grain, with the balance of this 3360-acre farm in hay land and pasture. More check-ups, blood work and phone calls would follow in the coming months.

Rob then waited for a phone call. "I actually got a call in November but tested positive for Covid-19 so I couldn't get the lungs," says Rob, who wasn't even feeling sick. He went back on the Transplant List when he tested negative for Covid a couple weeks later.

On December 21st, UAH called to tell Rob they had a possible donor for him. Two days later they confirmed the donor was a match and

told him to come in. On December 24th, Rob underwent the seven-hour transplant surgery and received two lungs from an anonymous donor. As Sue wrote on Facebook after Rob's surgery, "It is impossible to express to the donor and family the gratitude we have for your loved one's donation and the grief that your family is experiencing with your loss. We are forever grateful."

UAH is the organ transplant centre for Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Last year, it performed 70 lung transplants. Fifty people are continually on its Wait List for new lungs. While the average life expectancy for lung transplant patients was once 10 years, that number is now at 15 to 20 years or more. Many of today's lung donors are people who have died from drug overdoses.

Rob spent a week in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) following surgery and then was moved on December 30th to the Post Transplant ward. "The first two weeks I felt like I got hit by a train," he recalls. "I was really weak. They break the sternum bone in your chest and open you up to put the lungs in and then sew you back up. I had to learn how to take a breath and keep breathing because I was so used to the oxygen machine blowing air at me."

Rob was released from UAH on January 16th. He needed to remain close to the hospital for three months. Rather than move to a nearby hospital provided apartment, Rob and Sue stayed at Sue's mom and husband's apartment a half hour away in Leduc, where Sue had

already been residing since the surgery.

Rob's continued recovery, however, did not go as planned. Four days later, on January 20th, his 55th birthday, Rob returned to hospital because of an infection in his incision and sternum bone. "Two weeks after I got out of ICU, I rolled over one night and heard a pop. The wires used to wire the bone in the sternum back together had pulled out. That is what started the infection," Rob explains. "The doctors had to do another surgery, clean out the infection, and rewire the sternum again. When they did an x-ray the next day, they discovered the wires hadn't held because my bones were too soft and brittle. I would have a hole in my chest for the next two months. They wouldn't let me out of the hospital because they were scared I would get a serious infection in my lungs or heart. I felt great. Everything with my lungs was going good. I just had this serious infection. For two months they tried everything - soaking it, wound vacs - nothing worked. When they finally got the infection cleared up, then the hole wouldn't heal."

On March 8th, a frustrated Rob headed home to the farm for a few days but returned to the hospital again on March 13th. On March 23rd, he underwent a third surgery. "They removed the wires. A plastic surgeon took my left pec muscle, folded it down over the hole in my chest, covered it up, and then sewed it back up. That worked. I was on really strong antibiotics for six more weeks," Rob says.

On April 4th, Rob was released from UAH.

While doctors wanted him to stay close by, this 2015 Curtis Clark Achievement Award winner was having none of that. "I told the doctor, 'You've had me for three months. My mother-in-law is coming home from Arizona. So, I'm going home to my home!'" he smiles. During his hospital stay, Rob had 23 different roommates and a private room only the last week. Sue stayed by his side throughout, going home only the occasional weekend or when "Rob was tired of me beating him at Crib," she laughs.

Today, Rob is feeling good, and his health continues to improve. His oxygen level is at 100%. His wound has healed. The infection is gone. It will take about a year for him to regain the muscle mass he lost while in hospital. He takes a "bucket" of pills every day, 26 in all, with three of these anti-rejection pills he will take for life. He records his blood pressure and heart rate daily along with a barometer reading that measures the volume of his lungs. Rob has become diabetic since the surgery, but it is hoped that once his drug dosage is lowered his pancreas will begin working normally again. He returns to the hospital as required for check-ups and "Bronchoscopes" to ensure his airways remain fully open. "While I get tired by night, I can do just about anything I want now and have the strength to do," says Rob. "This spring I drove tractor. I had a pit crew to fill my driller, but I was able to sit in the tractor and drive. That felt pretty darn good!"

While the Crest family has experienced a roller coaster of emotions and stress during Rob's journey, they are forever grateful for the blessings, support and well wishes they have received from the medical and dairy community. "The surgeons, transplant team and nurses at UAH were all really great," says Rob. "Everybody complains about the health care system in Canada, but it is pretty good. One day we walked out of the pharmacy with a little bag of drugs that cost \$6800. I paid \$50 and Blue Cross covered that." Sue agrees, saying, "We asked the transplant team what Robert's costs for the transplant and hospital stay were and they couldn't give us a number, but it had to be in the hundreds of thousands of dollars." Organ donations save lives and Rob's experience has led Sue and their children to register as organ donors.

As Rob Crest humbly says, "The lung transplant saved my life. I can keep doing what I like doing and spend time with my family." That is the greatest gift anyone can ask for.

Each province maintains its own organ donor registry. Simply do an online search for an organ donor registry in your province. Thank you.



Photo by Jenna Jongenotter

Rob Crest of Skycrest Holsteins, Athabasca, AB, is doing well and his health is now on the upswing following lung transplant surgery late last year. On June 9th, the Crest family, from left, Chad, Katelyn, Rob and Sue, gathered together for this photo at Alberta Dairy Congress in Rimbey where they flank SKYCREST HELIX NUTHOUSE VG-85-1yr, their second prize summer 2-year-old who completes five generations of VG/EX.