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## Transplant patient ready to take on life

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By Michael Drakulich Sun-times news group

For the first time in his short life, Joey Mayer can walk and talk at the same time.

The New Lenox cystic fibrosis patient got his lifelong wish last month: a double lung transplant.

Last year, Mayer was featured in a television commercial for the Illinois Secretary of State's organ and tissue donor program.

» [Click to enlarge image](#)



**Joey Mayer sits with Sophie the family dog in his home in New Lenox. Joey, who suffers from cystic fibrosis and appeared in organ donor commercials recently received a double lung transplant that has given him a new lease on life.**

*Art Vassey/Special to the herald news*

Now the 19-year-old is ready to take life head on and do many of the things he couldn't before the transplant. And he's looking forward to helping those still waiting for organ transplants.

Mayer got the call about a donor being found right around Labor Day. It was especially fortunate for him because Mayer's health had been particularly poor in the weeks leading up to the surgery.

Cystic fibrosis is a congenital condition marked by the accumulation of thick bacteria-laden phlegm in the lungs and pancreas.

"My left lung was 75 percent unusable and the right was 50 percent unusable. The head surgeon looked at that and was surprised I was still alive because my lungs were so damaged. If this transplant didn't come through, I didn't think I'd make it to 2008," Mayer said.

Mayer had gotten his hopes up twice before only to have them quashed at the last minute. In April 2006, doctors called him and said they had a set of lungs ready, but by the time he got to the hospital and was ready for surgery, doctors said the lungs had aspirated and fluid seeped in. A second call about a year ago also looked promising but doctors discovered bruising on one of the lungs.

Mayer said he understood doctors only wanted him to have the best lungs possible. Any anomaly would only complicate an already difficult recovery. He only hoped that the third time was a charm.

### **The first breath**

One of the first things he was able to appreciate was being able to take a full breath just afterward.

"I could feel my lungs filling up all the way. There was nothing in there, nothing blocking the flow of air. It was hard to get used to it at first. I found myself wearing my oxygen mask as security, for comfort," he said.

Mayer will have to take anti-rejection drugs for the rest of his life, but he's on a particularly strict regimen for the first three months. He takes a series of antiviral and antifungal medications, plus steroids to aid in recovery and fight off rejection. His immune system has to be suppressed by medication so the body will not reject the new lungs. Especially for the first three months after surgery, he must be careful to limit his exposure to anything that could trigger infection or rejection.

When he's outdoors he wears a mask. He can't be around too many crowds. Contact with animals should be limited.

He also must be careful with what he eats. Fresh fruits or vegetables are out and meat must be cooked to 165 degrees to eliminate consumption of anything harmful.

But he keeps a sense of humor about the restrictions. "Yeah, I can't do anything like change a baby's diaper, which really saddens me," he said with a laugh.

Despite having to be "paranoid about rejection" for the next few months, Mayer still feels liberated. He's grateful for being able to do simple things, like walk up a flight of stairs quickly. Since he hasn't been able to do anything active for his whole life, he says he's finding his body tires more quickly than his lungs. So he wants to slowly build up his strength and fitness.

Already he's been able to lengthen the walks he takes with his dog Sophie. And his aspirations go much higher. He hopes to run a 5K race before the first anniversary of his surgery and eventually go away to college.

"My energy level has gone through the roof. I used to have to sleep 10 hours a day and take two naps. Now I can get more done in one day than I would in three or four before the surgery," he said.

Mayer says now that he can be more active, he wants to feel like he's accomplishing something and making the most of his life.

In the meantime, Mayer said he wants to get through the next two months without complications and take a vacation he can actually enjoy without having to lug around a bunch of medical equipment.

Then in the spring, he and his family plan to have a big party for friends and neighbors. Mayer has already dubbed it "my lung welcoming party."

With a second chance, Mayer is eager to get on with living.

For more information on organ donation, go to [www.donatelifellinois.org](http://www.donatelifellinois.org).