Bill Halcomb has been using his NxStage System One home hemodialysis machine for a month, but to him, this form of kidney disease treatment feels more like a month-long vacation. Since opting against a kidney transplant, Halcomb has been a slave to in-center dialysis for the past 13 years. To express his frustration, he even created his own website, “ihatedialysis.com” (see NN&I, August 2006). Recently, however, Halcomb has taken charge of his life by beginning the mental and physical transition to home dialysis. He has been on the NxStage system for only a short time, but says that he finally has the freedom he has longed for since being diagnosed with kidney disease.

The old routine involved five to six hours of in-center dialysis three days a week. Every Sunday—for 13 years— Halcomb said he would get the horrible, sick feeling that comes from fluid overload, and it would not go away until after his Monday afternoon dialysis session. Halcomb said he “got tired of having to abide by their rules, their regulations, and their policies.” He was ready for a change.

The switch was quick and easy after some training sessions on the NxStage: one day in-center, and the next day Halcomb was dialyzing at home. The transition went smoothly—both physically and emotionally. Physically, dialysis time decreased from six hours to two-and-a-half hours. Instead of taking off nine pounds of fluid between sessions, he now takes off 2.2 pounds. He said he “sleeps like a baby.” Emotionally, he prefers sitting in the comfort of his own home, with his supportive wife and nine-year-old son by his side, watching movies, and sharing meals. Most importantly, Halcomb said he is now responsible for the control of his own health.

He chooses his dialysis days and times. “I’m on my schedule, and that’s impossible when you’re in-center.” If a NxStage user misses his or her treatment, they can simply make it up. They can do their treatments earlier or later in the day, a choice that was not offered with in-center treatment. In-center patients are tied to someone else’s schedule, and missing a treatment is not an option.

The NxStage system is 75 pounds, portable, and easy to use. “If you can operate a simple computer, you can operate the NxStage machine,” Halcomb said.

After using NxStage for only five days, Halcomb said he felt great, and people even said he had more color in his face. He said he felt in charge now, and more aware and concerned about his health than ever before. For him, the difference between the two treatments was like night and day.

Instead of in-center dialysis three times a week, Halcomb uses his home dialysis system five days per week. He said he prefers this schedule because he actually feels good the entire seven days. At home, with his television, DVD player, Internet, massage chair, and control over the machine, he enjoys not having to wait for a nurse to complete a task he can now do himself.

Although NxStage is becoming more popular, Halcomb admits it may not be for everyone. People must be ready to take on the responsibility and have the desire to change. They have to get over the fear of needles, and learn to stick themselves. While a feeling of freedom may be the reward, the willingness to change and the ability to adapt to home dialysis is required.

Halcomb said he is often asked how he could hate dialysis when it saved his life. “Just as cancer patients have to do chemo to stay alive, I must do dialysis. I hate it, but I do it to survive,” he said. When it comes to the NxStage machine, however, he said, “I’m not lying when I say I feel like I’ve been on vacation.” The transformation from in-center to NxStage has been a positive experience. So much so that Halcomb now operates two websites: ihatedialysis.com, and his newest one, iloveNxStage.com.

Halcomb said the sites allow him to spread the news about dialysis and his enthusiasm for NxStage. He compares the two sites to the Chinese yin-yang symbol. Ihatedialysis.com is not meant to be negative, but bears a catchy name to attract patients that need a place to rant, rave, share stories, ask questions, and get real feedback. Ilovenxstage.com is a forum for people to discuss their feelings about using NxStage System One.

Using NxStage has helped Halcomb to stay true to his other roles in life, he said. He is involved in his son’s school, participating in organizations such as the PTA, yearbook, and sporting events.

Halcomb still worries about what the future holds. “My biggest fear now? Having to go back to in-center [dialysis],” he said. Knowing that things can go wrong while doing dialysis, Halcomb is comfortable using NxStage. “I don’t know what I’ll do if I had to go back,” he said. NxStage has brought him hope and a new outlook on life. “I want to see my son graduate,” Halcomb explains, and he feels home dialysis has brought him one step closer to this goal.