

Minnesota Vikings' Kenechi Udeze diagnosed with a form of leukemia

Vikings teammates say defensive end, 24, is staying positive in hospital

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The Vikings' family reacted with surprise and support Tuesday to the news that defensive end Kenechi Udeze has been diagnosed with a form of leukemia.

Defensive tackle Spencer Johnson said he phoned Udeze in his hospital room Monday night and found him to be typically upbeat.

"He said he'll be all right," Johnson said. "It was a blow to him, but he's in good spirits."

Defensive tackle Pat Williams made the same observation, declining further comment out of respect for Udeze.

A first-round draft choice of the Vikings in 2004, Udeze played in all 16 games last season, tying for the team lead and matching his career high with five sacks. He also became a father for the first time on Nov. 28 as he and his wife, Terrica, celebrated the birth of a daughter, Bailey.

Heading into the final season of his Vikings contract, Udeze might be facing an uncertain future, but Johnson said his teammate's attitude is strong.

"He said the support has been great," Johnson said. "A couple people came by and visited him in the hospital. That helped me out. I was shocked when I found out. He said he'll be in the hospital for two months and have to get chemo."

A local oncologist, while stressing that he has no direct knowledge of Udeze's case, provided some general information about leukemia.

Dr. Joe Leach of Park Nicollet Clinic and Methodist Hospital in St. Louis Park said there are dozens of different types of leukemia, which he described as cancer of the blood and specifically the bone marrow, where blood is made.

"We generally break them into two broad categories: acute or fast-growing leukemias, and chronic or slow-growing leukemias," Leach said. "Someone like Kenechi Udeze would most likely have acute leukemia just because of his age (24). Chronic leukemias by and large tend to be diseases of older people, so we don't usually see those until people get up in their 40s, 50s and really 60s and above."



Vikings DE Kenechi Udeze (Joe Rossi/Pioneer Press) (Staff)

Leach described acute leukemia as an "aggressive but curable" disease, requiring intensive chemotherapy treatment and a prolonged hospital stay.

"A month is the absolute minimum, and in general it's one to two months," he said. "If it's an acute leukemia, you're talking about probably four months of treatment."

In a best-case scenario, Leach said, the chemotherapy treatments would eradicate the cancer. If not, depending on the type of cancer, a bone-marrow transplant can be necessary.

As for the chances of Udeze playing football again, and how soon, Leach said although it's impossible to say without knowing the details of his case, Udeze almost certainly won't play this season.

"He'll be out for a year for sure," Leach said. "I can't imagine even someone in tip-top shape coming back sooner than that. Honestly, the coming back to football, as everybody knows, is really not the issue. The issue is whether he's going to survive this. This is a very deadly cancer. If he does - and he definitely does have some things in his favor - I can't imagine he'd be out less than a year. But I wouldn't say it's impossible that he could come back. I think if all went perfectly, he could come back - not this season, but the season after."

Two major factors in Udeze's favor are his age and the fact that he was in excellent physical condition before being stricken with cancer, having just completed his fourth NFL season.

That doesn't guarantee a quick or full recovery, but it obviously doesn't hurt.

"The younger you are, the better your prognosis," Leach said. "If all goes well and he gets in remission with treatment, then, yeah, I don't see any reason he couldn't come back. It's kind of similar to the Lance Armstrong thing. He went through extremely difficult treatment (for testicular cancer), was basically out for a year and came back as good as new. This could be potentially the same kind of thing."

Johnson said he didn't know where Udeze is staying, but KMSP Channel 9 reported that he is at Fairview Southdale Hospital after visiting the Mayo Clinic in Rochester last week.

Vikings coach Brad Childress is out of the office this week, but the team released a statement.

"With reports surfacing about Kenechi Udeze, we respect the privacy of Kenechi," Childress said in that statement. "The thoughts and prayers of the entire Minnesota Vikings organization are with Kenechi and his family."

Johnson said defensive line coach Karl Dunbar broke the news last week to Vikings players in Hawaii at the Pro Bowl, which Johnson attended as a guest of defensive tackle Kevin Williams, who said he hasn't spoken to Udeze and doesn't know any of the details of his condition.

Even with all the support and everything Udeze has going for him, he is in for the fight of his life.

"It's a devastating diagnosis," Leach said. "It is an unbelievably life-altering kind of cancer because it instantly changes your life."