



LIVING HEALTHY with Crohn's Disease

According to the Crohn's and Colitis Foundation of America (CCFA), over 1.6 million Americans live with Crohn's Disease or ulcerative colitis – collectively known as Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD). In the New England area alone, over 55,000 people have Crohn's or ulcerative colitis.

It's important to understand the difference between Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis. Crohn's disease can affect any part of the Gastrointestinal (GI) Tract, but ulcerative colitis affects only the colon. Additionally, while Crohn's disease can affect all layers of the bowel wall, ulcerative colitis only affects the lining of the colon.

It seems like so many of us have a connection to IBD in some way or another, whether it be through family, friends, fellow co-workers, or ourselves. I have Crohn's Disease – which, ironically, has been more of a blessing than a curse because it has made me a much stronger, more determined, healthier, and compassionate person.

Crohn's

“Crohn's disease is an inflammatory bowel disease. It causes inflammation of the lining of your digestive tract, which can lead to abdominal pain, severe diarrhea, fatigue, weight loss, and malnutrition. Inflammation caused by Crohn's disease can involve different areas of the digestive tract in different people, and often the disease spreads deep into the layers of affected bowel tissue. Crohn's disease can be both painful and debilitating and sometimes may lead to life-threatening complications. While there's no known cure for Crohn's disease, therapies can

greatly reduce its signs and symptoms and even bring about long-term remission. With treatment, many people with Crohn's disease are able to function well.”

- Mayo Clinic, a worldwide leader in medical care

My Story

Growing up, I experienced periodic episodes of what I would call an “upset stomach”. When I was 17 years old, my symptoms got worse. After many tests and biopsies, I was finally diagnosed with ulcerative colitis at age 19. Over the next eight years I endured many painful and debilitating flare-ups, hospital stays, and became non-responsive to medications that had previously helped me. Ultimately, I had to rely on long-term high doses of prednisone to maintain disease remission. Not a good thing. But the glass was still half full in my eyes!

At this point, my gastroenterologist advised that he was out of medication options for my refractory case. He recommended a major intestinal surgery called the “J-Pouch” procedure. This newly advanced surgical method would eliminate the need for a permanent ileostomy bag. Consulting surgeons and my doctor all agreed this was the best solution. It would be a cure for the ulcerative colitis because my entire colon would be removed; therefore, the disease would be gone. Happy day!

I started having symptoms that mimicked the ulcerative colitis about seven months post-surgery. I developed deep inflammation and ulceration in segments of my small intestine several years later. Additionally, I developed serious small intestinal infections and abscesses,

painful bowel blockages, and other challenging complications – none of which I had ever experienced with the prior ulcerative colitis. I was eventually re-diagnosed with Crohn's Disease. In my case, the surgery was not a cure. Not to worry!

Although I was disappointed, I quickly had to accept that it was no use looking back in the rear view mirror. I couldn't change the past. What I could do was keep moving forward with optimism, courage, determination, humor, and a healthy lifestyle. And that's exactly what I've been doing for decades! “Crohn's Disease does not define me...it's just something I have and deal with head on...it has never stopped me from accomplishing goals and having a successful career and personal life.” - Jill Cascarano

Healthy Strategies

Many years had passed since my original surgery so my treating doctors now had new biologic drugs and other anti-inflammatory medications available to treat my IBD – without relying on prednisone. We've utilized several medication options that have greatly reduced my Crohn's symptoms and given me longer periods of remission.

Below are some tips that have helped me better manage my Crohn's and live a happy, vibrant life:

• **Partner with your doctors.** Take an active role in your care. I consider my relationship with my doctors to be partnerships. Don't underestimate the knowledge you bring to the table regarding your own body and how you feel. It's important to

be comfortable with and confident in your gastroenterologist. Before visits and/or procedures, bring a list of your questions and/or concerns. Jot down key things discussed (i.e., addition of new medication, decrease in current drug dosage, nutrition and diet suggestions). Make sure your treating doctors communicate and update one another on your medical status, so everyone is on the same page. It's easy for them to stay in touch via email, texts, mailed notes, etc.

• **Attend medical appointments.** Be present at scheduled first visits and follow-up appointments with your doctors. Even if you are feeling great, always show up to your visits, so the doctor can examine you for him or herself, talk to you in detail, do any bloodwork, and schedule tests or procedures as needed. In between visits, if you experience any changes in your disease health or have questions, never hesitate to call your doctor's office for advice.

• **Be diligent with medications.** Know what you're taking. Read all side effects of your medications. Pay attention to warnings about any known drug interactions, best time of day to take the medication, with or without food, etc. At home, keep your medications together in a convenient location. Maybe invest in a handy pill tracking chart or container available at pharmacies and other stores. Carry essential medications securely on your person (i.e., in your pocketbook or back pack) so when you're out, you will be able to take your pills at the same time each day. Become keenly aware of the shape, size, and color of your oral medications. Always physically look at the tablet or capsule