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South Africa

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CHOC helps us understand the people that deal with cancer on a daily basis

We spoke to Sarah Whitaker who is a cancer survivor and asked her about her brave journey to recovery. Today Sarah is 24 years old and her story teaches us how to be strong in adverse situations and never to take good health for granted.

I was diagnosed with ALL (acute lymphoblastic leukemia) just before my sixth birthday and was treated in Ward 294 at the Jo'burg General Hospital for three years. CHOC formed a very big part of my life during these years. I am now a Psychology student at the University of the Witwatersrand. My experience of leukaemia left such a mark on my life that I decided to focus my Honours and Masters research on the long-term effects of leukaemia treatment. Spending time in the paediatric oncology unit where I was treated all those years ago made me realise that there is something very special about that place, and I hold it very close to my heart.



Sarah Whitaker
24 years old

Was it difficult to keep up with schoolwork and did your friends and teachers help you?

I was lucky enough to have very devoted school teachers who would meet with my mom regularly and give her all my schoolwork so we could do it while I was in hospital. My mom has a teaching background, which also helped a lot. When I returned to school permanently, I struggled socially in the beginning, as everybody had already made their friends. It took me a while to settle down on this front, but academically I had no problems.

Did you often miss school?

In the first year on treatment, I missed a lot of school because I felt very sick. After that, I tried to go to school as much as possible when I felt well enough, as my mom believed it was important for me to experience life as a normal child.

Did you have a special diet and could you exercise?

My parents consulted with a dietician so they could know the best ways to nourish me. While I was on cortisone, my appetite was insatiable! I could easily eat six fried eggs for breakfast and I used to crave sausages all the time. Now I don't like sausages – I think I overdid it in those days! I wasn't able to do any exercise because my joints always felt sore. I've never been one to enjoy exercise anyway!

Did having cancer change your daily routine? How?

I couldn't do a lot of the things my friends were able to do, like play sport or do extramurals. I also swallowed pills three times a day, which was a challenge. My mom used to try hiding the pills in a spoon of ice cream but I would always feel them and pick them out!

What did you do when you were not feeling well that day?

I used to stay at home in bed with my dogs, which used to make me feel better (I love dogs). I watched a lot of TV and did lots of puzzles with my mom.

Did you tell your friends when you were not having a good day?

I don't really remember. I think what would happen is my mom would tell their mom, who would tell them.

Did you feel different to other children?

Yes – what bothered me the most is that I had no hair.

Do you think that you have become stronger because you were ill? And how?

Definitely. I think when you have fought for your life, it comes with a resilience and determination that other people don't have.

When you first heard that you had cancer, did it frighten you?

I didn't really understand – I was very young. What frightened me is when I saw my mom crying and I didn't know what was wrong.

How did CHOC help you?

CHOC eased the pain by offering fun activities in the ward. I used to love baking on Fridays and the days when a South African celebrity would come and visit us. One lady in particular from CHOC was always very good to me. She used to bring me presents all the time, which made me happy. Her daughter also used to come and visit me during the school holidays. She is my very best friend to this day.

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