

Patient Perspective: Natasha Trehan

Elementary school is hard enough to navigate without having to come to terms with developing a life-long illness. In the summer of 2016, I noticed my left wrist and fingers were inflamed. I was actively playing tennis and assumed that I had suffered a sprain. An X-ray and ultrasound proved that there was something more. My family doctor then ordered blood work and immediately referred me to a rheumatologist at The Hospital for Sick Children who diagnosed me with juvenile idiopathic arthritis (JIA). I was only 13 years old. My family and I had never heard of this disease before, and the diagnosis changed my life.

I struggled to respond to remarks and questions from my peers when I did not participate in physical education class due to the intense pain in my feet. My limited ability to write and complete assignments led many to discourage me from pursuing my chosen science subjects. I was forced to advocate for myself during the next few years in high school. Besides the challenges that I faced in school, my disease was not fully managed as my body did not respond to several medications that I was prescribed. Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) reports revealed that I had damage to my feet, fingers, and wrists. Finally, after having tried non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) and biologics, 10 corticosteroid shots in my small joints and triple therapy helped bring down the blood test markers as well as the inflammation.

Although my family and friends supported me every step of the way, I felt alone. I wanted to know about the experiences of other people who were diagnosed at my age. When I tried seeking out support groups, I found that none of them were youth-led. I recognized a huge need, and I was determined to fill this gap. During the pandemic lockdown, I learned about my disease and how it affects my joints. I reached out to research organizations, doctors, and hospitals to get involved in research. I became a patient partner with the Choice Research Lab, a citizen partner with the COVID-END team and a member of the National Advisory Board on Pain Canada. I completed a summer internship in the department of eHealth Innovation at the University Health Network and, the following year, I was a research student in the Cell Biology program at The Hospital for Sick Children.

In March 2021, I launched a podcast called “Take a Pain Check”. In each episode, I host and interview guests directly or indirectly involved with or affected by autoimmune diseases. They could be youth living with the disease, caregivers, researchers, or healthcare professionals. Each individual gets to share their experience and story



Natasha Trehan, founder of the Take a Pain Check Foundation and host of the “Take a Pain Check” podcast, available at www.takeapaincheck.com.

with the goal of empowering listeners. To date, more than 60 guests have been featured and have discussed their health journeys, life with chronic illness, advocacy, school, relationships, successes, and challenges. The podcast is widely available on a number of platforms including YouTube, Spotify, Apple, Google Podcasts, and iHeartRadio. In October 2021, I created the Take a Pain Check Foundation, a not-for-profit organization with the mission of forming a safe and inclusive community and creating awareness, as well as supporting others through connection and content creation on social media. To spread more awareness, I have been featured on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) Ottawa Morning radio show, as well as releasing a documentary about community support and friendship in relation to chronic illness. I have also shared my story with the York Region newsletter.

The podcast has grown into a community of approximately 2000-plus guests, ambassadors, health care professionals, volunteers, listeners, and followers. The Take a Pain Check platform has expanded to Instagram, Twitter, TikTok and Facebook. We host bi-weekly podcasts, run ambassador programs for health professionals and youth, pilot rheumatic disease-related events, feature stories on our blog platform and lead monthly Joint Chat Rheum hangouts. My overall goal is to continue to give and be a voice, as well as support and connect those living with chronic illnesses for years to come.

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