

Teen with IBD Pays the Healing Forward



High school student Chloe Fujii is working on a graphic novel to help fellow teens diagnosed with inflammatory bowel disease.

PHOTO COURTESY MILLER CHILDREN'S & WOMEN'S HOSPITAL LONG BEACH

In 2018, when she was in eighth grade, Chloe Fujii started having unexplained stomach pain. Her parents began to suspect that she was lactose intolerant. By her first year of high school, however, the stomach pain and diarrhea were so bad that Chloe found herself at [Miller Children's & Women's Hospital Long Beach](#), where she spent 17 days. Chloe has ulcerative colitis, an inflammatory bowel disease. Her doctor, pediatric gastroenterologist [Anjali Kumar, M.D.](#), says that symptoms can be different for each person but can also include blood in

stool and weight loss. In teens, these symptoms can even interfere with growth.

Medications and dietary changes can bring the disease into remission, and that's what has happened for Chloe. "I feel a lot better healthwise," she says. "I've learned to manage my stress better and not to hold onto and beat myself up for every little thing."

A longtime Girl Scout, she has also decided to use her Girl Scout Gold Award project to try to help other teens with chronic illnesses. She is currently writing a graphic

novel about her experiences and hopes to self-publish it in January. Though IBD is one of the more common chronic illnesses in adolescents, it doesn't always receive much attention. "It's sometimes overlooked," Chloe says. She was the first teen she knew who had colitis, and the first at her school to receive special accommodations because of the illness.

Kumar says that many teens diagnosed with IBD are hesitant to talk with family and friends about the disease. "They often feel that they are the only teenager with a disease," she says. "They may also be scared of how to manage their symptoms while doing things like going to school, hanging out with friends, dating or playing sports. This can lead to feelings of stress, anxiety or depression."

Chloe says she still feels anxiety about the possibility that her symptoms will flare up again. "It's still kind of hard for me to advocate for myself sometimes," she says. "It's hard when you're in a flare-up and you look fine on the outside but on the inside, it feels like you're kind of dying." Initially, she also blamed herself for being sick and missing so much school. Seeing a therapist and using breathing exercises and affirmations has helped her deal with the stress.

To teens who might be having health issues, Chloe says not to ignore your symptoms. "Even if it's kind of uncomfortable, talk to your parents," she says. "I could have avoided a lot of things in my health journey if I was more proactive and I spoke out." Meanwhile, she reminds those diagnosed with IBD that healing takes time. "You have to have a lot of patience with yourself and the people who are trying to help you," she says. "You have to be kind to yourself."

Miller Children's & Women's Hospital Long Beach plans to make Chloe's graphic novel available to all newly diagnosed IBD patients. Anyone looking for more information can contact the [Crohn's & Colitis Foundation](#). ♦