

How Modern Medicine Failed Me and My Journey to Finding Health After Being Diagnosed With Ankylosing Spondylitis

by A.G.

I am writing my story in the hopes that by sharing it, others will find hope that a cure may be out there for them if they just keep searching for answers. I was lucky enough to have family around me that helped me get through my darkest times and I will forever be grateful for what they have done for me. I spent many hours on the AS blogs reading others' stories during my diagnosis and I feel as though it is my duty to share my success.

I grew up in St. Charles MO alongside my mother, father and two sisters. I had a fairly normal childhood if you don't count the many broken bones, scrapes, bruises, etc. of any other very active child. Other than that, I was a healthy child. No diseases or illnesses other than the occasional cold. I have always loved to play sports and as I grew older, running and soccer became my passion. Every ounce of my free time outside of school was filled with practices and games and I loved every second of it.

I will begin my story in the year of 2004. I was 18 and had graduated from high school in May and consumed my summer with preparing for my first year of college soccer at Lindenwood University in my hometown of St. Charles. I was going there on a scholarship along with four other teammates from my select soccer team. I couldn't have been happier. The beginning of our season was great, however, my health began to go south in October of that year.

It started off with a severe sinus infection that lasted for weeks. I had my sinuses drained multiple times and was on a regular cycle of sinus/cold medicine. Just as I was beginning to feel well again, I suddenly got bursitis in my knee during a game. My knee swelled up like a basketball and refused to return to its normal size even with constant use of a compression sleeve. By this time, I had been benched for the entire second half of my college season and I was devastated.

My body just felt off and I couldn't seem to regain that sense of confidence and drive in my sport that I had had since I was five or six. This led me to my decision to transfer to the University of Missouri-Columbia and quit the game I loved so much growing up. It was a tough decision but somehow I knew in my heart that it was for the best.

Fast forward to the Spring of 2006. I was into the second semester of my sophomore year and I had started to enjoy some of the extra time I had without a strict soccer schedule. It was at this time that I felt my first bout of what I call "heart pain". It was this extremely intense sharp pain on the left side of my chest that literally knocked me off my feet and kept me from breathing for seconds at a time. It would always come on strong at completely random times and would then be followed by hours of achiness that kept me from lying down and sleeping at night. These episodes would occur multiple times a day and really began to scare me. It was what I imagined a heart attack feeling like. That summer, I returned home from school and decided to schedule an appointment with my primary care physician. You must be wondering why I waited so long but I failed to mention before that I hate doctor offices and have an extreme phobia of needles. I have to be just about on my death bed to even consider a doctor's visit so this gives you an idea of how miserable I was feeling.

Costochondritis. This was the diagnosis I was given by my primary care physician. He gave me a prescription of ibuprofen and sent me on my way saying there was nothing else he could do and that maybe this would help. I left his office very frustrated since I had already tried every pain killer and nothing made a dent on the pain I was feeling. I went back to his office 2 more times that year and was referred to a cardiologist and pulmonologist who all gave the same maybe costochondritis or pleurisy diagnosis since they couldn't find a single thing wrong. I was even given the suggestion of seeing a psychologist which really pissed me off! I was miserable and in pain and nobody could figure out why. I coped with this "heart pain" the best I could on my own and continued to search for answers with the help of my mom.

Summer 2007. I had finished my junior year of college and had accepted an internship at 24 Hour Fitness. I was working towards my degree in Fitness and Nutrition so I was thrilled about getting this opportunity. Midway through my internship I began having pain, stiffness and swelling in both hands in the morning and at night. Then a couple weeks later my feet began to feel the same and I would have to crawl to the bathroom in the mornings because it hurt too bad to stand on them until I got moving a little bit first. I was starting to get really concerned since this came out of now where and I was still struggling with my "heart pain". The final straw came about a week later when I woke up and my jaw was now in the mix and I couldn't manage to eat my breakfast due to the pain and stiffness.

August 2007. My first of many visit to my rheumatologist. I was given many physical exams and blood tests. My lymph nodes were swollen, my jaw was swollen, my hands were swollen and my feet and ankles were swollen. I had never felt more miserable in my life. At least that is what I felt like at the

time. Ankylosing Spondylitis was the confirmed diagnosis from my doctor. This was based on the fact that my inflammation was extremely high and the physical exams. I didn't actually have the genetic marker for it but everything else pointed to that diagnosis which was why I was given it. (This was apparently common)

I'm sorry what?? Is that real? Those were my first words to the doctor. I had never heard of this in my life and couldn't understand how I had gotten it. I was overwhelmed and confused as were my parents who were sitting next to me. I was a healthy child, how does this just happen?

The next 2 and half years of my life were a living nightmare. I was on every medicine at maximum doses and was still suffering. Sulfasalazine, methotrexate, naproxen, prednisone, Humira; the works. The swelling in my body had gone down, however, I was now having nausea, stomach pains, dizziness, hair loss, extreme fatigue and eventually bleeding in my stool. This sent me into an emergency visit with a gastroenterologist who scheduled an endoscopy and colonoscopy the following morning. He found multiple ulcers down my intestines caused by all the medicines I was on and so I was prescribed to take Prilosec before all the AS medicines. Why not, just add it the list of my daily drugs. This is how I was beginning to feel. This was my senior year of college. I was supposed to be having fun, going out and drinking with friends (I turned 21 the summer before), getting ready for graduation and the adult life we all dream about having until it actually comes and you suddenly realize how great being a child was. I had zero fun my senior year. I was depressed, in pain and drove home almost every week for check-ups and to get my Humira shots. As you may recall I have an extreme phobia of needles and could not muster up the strength to give one to myself.

The morning of my last final before my graduation, I felt so extremely dizzy I could hardly make it to school. I fell twice on the driveway just trying to get into my car. I remember calling my parents crying because I had to take this final. My parents insisted that I call a taxi and not drive but of course I didn't listen. Luckily my final was at 8am and the roads are normally empty at this time of day in most college towns. I did make it to my final and even got an A despite the fact that I felt I was spinning in my chair the whole time. God was definitely with me that day!

This just couldn't be how I was going to live the rest of my life. I had become completely sedentary and could hardly make it through my classes without being so fatigued. This is coming from someone who spent her entire childhood running and playing sports every single day. So, with the help of my family and my AS bloggers, I decided to try other things. I first

tried multiple dietary changes but nothing seemed to really solve the problem.

My mother and I had always felt that my diagnosis of Ankylosing Spondylitis just didn't seem right. The only explanation we had ever been given from my rheumatologist as to how I got this disease was that something in my environment triggered my body into this disease. It seems as though this is the explanation for most auto-immune diseases. Something environmental. What was this environmental factor? What made my body flip a switch to turning against itself? Isn't there some way that I can flip the switch back? What was the underlying problem? These are all the questions that my mother and I were determined to figure out one way or another. We spent countless nights on the computer searching for these exact answers and wasn't really getting anywhere.

A glimmer of light at the other side of the tunnel:

My aunt was diagnosed for the second time with breast cancer at the same time I was going through my health problems and she began researching alternative treatments since the chemo and radiation really took a toll on her body the first time. She came across Dr. Simon Yu through her research and decided to begin seeing him. Dr. Yu is a board certified internist who practices Complimentary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) in the St. Louis area. He helped my aunt in so many ways. Even though my aunt found him too late in her diagnosis (she had the BRCA gene and the cancer had spread to her lungs, bones, and lymph nodes before she even began seeing him; she passed away 8 months after her second diagnoses) she insisted that I give him a chance.

May 2010. At this point in my life I was willing to try anything and everything. My first visit with Dr. Yu I went through a series of testing from food and environmental allergy tests to tissue mineral analysis testing to full body meridian tests that showed areas in my body that were not functioning normally. I had a number of things going on but my dental scans came up extremely bad with each test. I highly recommend every person read *The Accidental Cure* by Dr. Simon Yu. It will open up your eyes to so many health issues that go untreated in the medical world today due to underlying dental problems.

My saving grace:

Once I had taken care of some other small underlying problems, we started to focus on what was going on with my teeth. Dr. Yu referred me to Dr. Stewart Moreland, an oral surgeon in the St. Louis area. Dr. Yu and Dr.

Moreland have worked together for years helping people who have underlying dental problems.

June 2010. My first visit with Dr. Moreland I was given a Panorex Digital Dental x-ray which revealed infections in the areas where my wisdom teeth had been taken out. I had my wisdom teeth removed my Junior year of high school. That was back in 2003!

August 2010. My first oral surgery. Once Dr. Moreland opened up the affected sites, he could not believe the level of infection that had been brewing in my body the last 7 years. It was as if the area where my wisdom teeth were removed had NEVER healed. My first surgery consisted of scraping and drilling out this infection. I honestly cannot say this was in any way fun. I had been dreading this surgery since the minute I found out I needed it. I wasn't really sure what to expect after that surgery but I will be forever grateful for that day.

By January 2011, I was feeling so great that I stopped taking the Humira shots. I had taken these shots every Sunday and I could always tell by the Saturday before that I needed it. I no longer felt the achiness come on. My rheumatologist couldn't explain the sudden change but was delighted to hear that I no longer needed to take it. Later this month, I had my second oral surgery with Dr. Moreland. There was so much infection in my gums that the first one had not gotten it all out which was determined through another meridian test at Dr. Yu's.

After my second surgery later that January, I no longer felt the need to take the sulfasalazine or methotrexate. I had been off the prednisone and naproxen for some time now because the stomach pain I felt from it was way worse than the pain in my joints. I still to this day get stomach pains from any anti-inflammatory pain medicine. So, I had taken myself off of ALL my medicine, I was feeling great!

At this time I met with my rheumatologist who I must say was really great. She was so nice and understanding of everything I was going through during the beginning stages of my AS diagnosis. I explained to my rheumatologist everything that I had gone through with Dr. Yu and Dr. Moreland and how after going through these surgeries I was feeling great. It seemed like more than a coincidence to me that all of a sudden my body had no inflammation or pain.

Unfortunately, she dismissed my entire story. I was shocked. How could you not understand how the infections in my teeth were causing my immune system to go out of whack and giving me symptoms that mimicked AS. I

was wrongly diagnosed and the proof was right in front of her. I left that office for the last time that January and she warned me that this was only a temporary relief and that I would always have AS no matter what. I felt defeated when I left that office. I really hoped that she would understand what happened to me so that she could help others who suffered from AS just like me.

I don't believe that every person can be cured through oral surgery; however, I do believe that I cannot be the only one in the world who this has happened to. Of all the children who get their wisdom teeth out every year, I cannot be the only one who ended up with serious infections. In August 2011, I had my third and final oral surgery. The bottom left side of my mouth was so bad that I needed a third surgery.

In October 2011, I ran my first half marathon. I had zero pain or swelling and I no longer felt the extreme fatigue that kept me sedentary for so long. Part of my healing process was stunted by the fact that my immune system had been so compromised from the medicines I was on for so long but in November of 2012, I had my final visit with Dr. Yu. My body was completely healed and I was officially back to the active life I had always had growing up. I have never to this day felt any pain or swelling in my joints and I couldn't be happier. I truly owe my health and well-being to my family and the doctors who were determined to find the underlying cause of my AS diagnosis. My hope is that this story will encourage you to keep fighting for a healthy life and to think outside the modern medicine box to find a cure.