

## **My Graves' Story, contributed by Christine Althaus**

I was leading a relatively normal, healthy life, spending an hour each evening running on my elliptical, and lifting weights, and then spending a good 20 minutes in my sauna at night before I was diagnosed. Ironically, I was eating like a horse. I'm about 5'1" and a little stockier build, so I attributed this to my exercising. Little did I know what was coming my way. March of 2011, just shy of my 31 birthday, I ended up with a sinus infection that wouldn't let go. I'd never been so sick, nor had I ever had a sinus infection to boot. I, at that time, never got sick. After a week of sinus hell I went in to the Dr. My blood pressure was 145/124. The nurse tried to reassure me that this was normal for someone who was so sick. My normal blood pressure is 100/60. I was very bothered by this, so when I finished the round of antibiotics they gave me, I went in for a good old fashioned physical.

At that time, my blood pressure was 143/122, and my resting pulse was 90 beats per minute. My Dr was appalled. He asked how I felt, and if I had any other symptoms and sent me off for some labs. He also put me on Atenelol for my heart rate. The next day I received a call from my Dr's nurse, and she flat out told me "we think you have Graves' disease". Imagine my shock! A disease, what are you talking about? Graves, who names something that? After I calmed down, and spoke with my Dr. I had a better grasp, and was sent off to my endocrinologist for the barrage of testing.

That poor man—he had no idea who he was getting! I am a business professional and am in dress clothes and stilettos most days. When my results came back, I was

sitting in the 70% of the uptake test. My Dr. stated he had never seen someone with Graves whose thyroid was over functioning at this level. He continued to ask me how I felt and if I ever had the shakes, did I notice my racing heart, and so on. I told him how high strung and hyper by nature I am, so no, I felt great! And I really did! He asked me stand without using my hands on the chair, which I did easily—I then asked him if I could try it again without my 4” heels on. He was amazed that I was functioning so well. I cracked jokes about how my thyroid was a spaz, similar to me. It was the size of a small butterfly, and was almost wrapped around my neck. Here I thought I was just a young lady getting old lady gizzard neck.

After a lot of soul searching we decided to go with medication. Due to my stocky build, “killing” my thyroid didn’t seem like the answer. I didn’t want to take hormones to raise my thyroid levels either if it went hypo. About 3 weeks into the med I woke up with a huge, buggy eye! I freaked out! Called my endocrinologist, cussed and swore at him about how I really enjoy my eyes and why couldn’t the antibodies attack another spot on my body—he sent me to an ophthalmologist, who in turn told me the damage was done. Needless to say, I truly lucked out here, as I have minimal eye retraction and it very rarely flares up. In fact, I’ve only had one flare up in the last two years.

About nine months in, my levels were about half of where they were and I started to lose hair, and a lot of hair. I was devastated. I have short hair, and it’s a spiky do, so I could cover it well, but I was clogging the drain, my husband teared up, and so did my mother one day when they saw how patchy my scalp was getting. After 2 visits with

my primary Dr and an argument with my endocrinologist on whether or not Graves' can cause this, I ended up at a dermatologist. She confirmed that it was from Graves, and as my levels reached normal, my body was starving for the hormone and started to strip it from wherever it could—and for me, it resulted in horrid dry scalp, and near baldness on half of my head. I ended up with an ointment that worked wonders, and had full hair re-growth in less than six months time. I loved my duck fuzz when it came in!

Most recently, my levels dipped low, and became hypo due to the dose of methimazole I was taking. This resulted in me gaining a bit of weight, and my poor family wishing I'd take my grumpy, overly tired self away. After a nice dose adjustment, I am sitting at "normal" levels for the first time in two years! I'm not quite at the weight I'd like to be at after my low dip in June, but I'm happy my thyroid is still intact and seems to be cooperating!

I've had to change how I eat, realizing I'm not a spring chicken and need to be careful. I had to force myself back into an exercise routine. My body had really adjusted well to functioning at the levels it was at, so slowing down was very difficult for me.

*Posted with permission of the author, Christine Althaus*