Your Thanksgiving With Lupus Survival Guide

by BARBARA LEECH

Getting Through Thanksgiving With Lupus Despite a Flare

I have been in a major flare for the last four Thanksgivings, and it appears this year will be no different. I have been blessed by periods of better health in between — thankfully — but it appears I have found a pattern in my lupus attacks.

Essentially, each fall I get a massive lupus flare — the kind where I begin to question if this is the beginning of the end of life as I know it.

I only realized the annual timing of these flares recently, from documenting my health on a weekly basis over several years. Apparently journaling reveals more than everyday lupus triggers — it reveals annual patterns in this disease.

So, it appears something brews inside me every September and carries on its attack straight into the holiday season. Is it the change in weather? Something in the air? Who knows!

I just know Thanksgiving has been something I have had to “get through” rather than enjoy for the last several years — and that makes me bitter and feeling that I am hopelessly out of control.

I Fight the Attack, But Lupus Wins

My journal reveals it is not food that triggers this annual flare. I try to eat smart and not aggravate my lupus, and at the first signs of an attack I am extra careful not to further fuel the flames.

It is not easy either, what with my addiction to all things pumpkin and dollops of whipped cream. But I behave and try to put up a good fight — until Thanksgiving.

We all face these challenges; knowing what we should eat and what we should avoid as to not feed our disease exactly what it needs to wage an attack against us.

But sometimes, when your life has been so altered by lupus and moments of pleasure are few and far between, we seek solace in things like pie — at least I do. Pie is something you can always count on to give you exactly what you expect. Life and lupus is not.

The Demands of Thanksgiving

This year, lupus began its attack by causing swelling in my eyes (scleritis), which affects the whites of your eyes, hurts and causes blurred vision. What I first thought was an eye infection that would not go away turned out to be one more way that lupus can attack the body.

I am on yet another round of steroid drops now, but as soon as I taper off them the swelling returns.

So, I'm in pain, my vision is poor and I've looked like I have pink eye for the last four weeks. My flare did not stop at my eyes though.

In early October I also developed pleurisy (swelling of the lungs) and the butterfly rash returned to my face. My hair began rapidly falling out again and I felt crippled by exhaustion 24/7.

As we head into November, I am feeling challenged beyond my limits every day. So, why am I hosting a super large family meal you might ask?

Well, I always have. It is, in fact, one of the things (because I am an avid cook) I give to the people I love.

That time around my table, all faces present and happy, is one of the things that matter most to me.

For many of us, Thanksgiving is more than the food — it is the experience. And I refuse to let lupus rob me of this one. Something bigger than myself is guiding me through this.

Make Every Moment Count

Here is the thing — lupus can steal so much of who you are, who you were, and the person you want to be. It is vital to hold on to the special moments that really matter.

They are worth the fight. Some things are not, but this one is.

Each holiday together is precious and you never know when it will be someone's last. This will be the second Thanksgiving since my mom passed from cancer.

Three years ago, on what was her last holiday season alive, I battled a horrible flare and made Thanksgiving dinner extra special. I am so thankful I did — I have no regrets.

So, no matter what you are feeling emotionally or physically, you can make that family magic happen. Take it in baby steps and fuel your body with healthy food choices — at least until the big meal is served.

If I can find the courage do it, I believe you can too. Here are a few tips to get you through it:

- **Everything in moderation.** If you must indulge in something full of sugar or processed ingredients, limit it to one small serving.
- **Find alternatives that satisfy you.** I often find that some really good organic yogurt can take the place of unhealthy desserts.
- **Don't overindulge in anything.** Taking a little bit of everything will satisfy your desire for the food and control that need to overload your plate and stomach.
- **Avoid alcohol.** Yes, a glass of wine might be nice but lupus and alcohol are not a good combination. Not worth a flare.
- **Get rest.** Easier said than done, but remember the holiday is not about the food or how clean your house is.
- **Ask for help.** If someone offers to bring something, take them up on their offer. You are not a super hero and there is much to be said for family that offers to help — they are something to be thankful for!

Above all, remember what is important: the faces around your Thanksgiving table. Value what matters and give thanks.