

Patient Perspective: Cristina Montoya

At 22 years old, while living in my hometown of Medellín, Colombia, I was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis (RA) and Sjögren's Syndrome. It was my last year in the Nutrition and Dietetics undergraduate program. My RA was so aggressive that even lifting a piece of paper or typing became a painful chore. Within a year of diagnosis, I started to develop joint deformities, because the era of biologics was in its early stages and inaccessible to me for financial reasons. I was terrified of not being able to graduate as a nutritionist and dietitian with my peers. Thanks to a load of corticosteroids, I was able to reach the finish line.



I came to Canada in 2007 and thought the best way to adapt to a new country was to hide my pain and move on. There were no resources for new immigrants living with autoimmune diseases. I pushed through my first Canadian winter, worked tirelessly to validate my degree as a registered dietitian, and focused my efforts on helping seniors in long-term care homes. I wanted to feel normal without thinking about my disease. In 2015, I joined the Sjögren's Society of Canada and have continued to volunteer for this organization in some capacity since my first meeting. Unfortunately, Sjögren's has no clear treatment path, leaving patients feeling isolated and dismissed by many health care providers. In my dietetic practice and volunteer work with support groups across Canada, nine out of ten patients with Sjögren's suffer from xerostomia, dysphagia, and digestive issues affecting their quality of life.

Now, at 40, I am a proud mama of a whimsical 3-year-old boy and was honoured to present at this year's CRA Annual Scientific Meeting with the workshop "Beyond Dry Eyes and Dry Mouth: Managing Digestive Disorders in Patients with Sjögren's Syndrome." I was pleasantly surprised when my own rheumatologist attended the workshop and thanked me for sharing my personal and professional experience with Sjögren's.

Despite COVID-19 and another RA treatment failure, I managed to run a small 5-week group program for women living with Sjögren's called "Surviving Summer with Sjögren's." The program's roadmap included starting an anti-inflammatory way of eating, building balanced meals and snacks, implementing safe swallowing strategies, creating emergency food kits, self-care routines, and managing common digestive issues. The participants were also given access to an intuitive meal planner to help them make their own meal choices.

After 20 years of living with inflammatory rheumatic diseases, I am reminded that living with chronic conditions is a marathon, not a sprint. We must focus on what we can control. Self-advocacy, robust support systems, and collaboration with our health care providers are our most powerful tools to thrive with RA and Sjögren's. There are hardships, sad moments, and times when you feel like giving up; but then I look at all the meaningful connections I've made despite RA and Sjögren's — and even because of them.

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