

A Journey of Strength: My Battle with Leukemia

In 2011, I was 22 years old, juggling work and my graduation, unaware that my life was about to take an unexpected turn. Coming from a humble background, I had little time to focus on my health. My father had been a mill worker until the mills shut down, leaving the financial burden on my shoulders, while my mother was a homemaker.

I ignored persistent symptoms—cold, cough, fever, and fatigue—convincing myself that I could push through. Work was my priority, and I had no time for illness. But when several colleagues at my workplace experienced similar symptoms, I finally decided to consult my family doctor. During the visit, I shared my symptoms and mentioned that some of my colleagues were experiencing similar issues. The doctor diagnosed it as a simple viral fever, but I insisted on a blood test just to be sure. I underwent the test on October 13, 2011, and continued with my daily routine, heading straight to work.

A few hours later, the pathologist urgently tried to contact me after noticing alarming abnormalities in my blood counts. When they couldn't reach me, they called my mother. Eventually, my doctor informed her of his suspicion of a serious illness and advised me to visit K.E.M. Hospital for further tests. Still, I remained indifferent to my worsening health.

That night, unaware of the storm ahead, I spent time with a friend, oblivious to how drastically my life was about to change. When I finally went to the hospital, the OPD I needed was closed. The available doctor advised me to either visit K.E.M. Hospital after two days or go to Tata Hospital immediately for further investigations. Choosing Tata that day turned out to be a life-saving decision.

After conducting the necessary tests, the doctors diagnosed me with acute leukemia, a form of blood cancer. My platelet count had dropped drastically to 24,000, and my blast percentage was at a critical 80–90%. Immediate treatment was essential to prevent a medical emergency.

Tata Memorial Hospital, a place I had passed by countless times without a second thought, became my battleground. The doctors reassured my family, emphasizing that by working together, we could fight and overcome this disease. At that time, the Rajiv Gandhi Yojana had just begun in 2011, and I received financial support through their Medical Social Work Department.

I still remember the night of October 13th and the following night—I was lying on the floor with only a bedsheet to cover myself. My mother sat beside me, her head down, overwhelmed with emotions. My father, along with our relatives and neighbours, crowded our house, all consumed by sadness and fear.

The treatment began on October 19th with MCP-841. My first chemotherapy session took place on the 12th floor of the hospital, marking the beginning of an arduous yet hopeful journey.

The treatment was gruelling. After two chemotherapy sessions, another bone marrow test was conducted to assess progress. I had mentally prepared myself for the painful needle procedure. The doctors had explained the potential side effects, including weight loss, hair loss, nausea, vomiting, and the weakening of healthy cells along with cancerous ones. My body initially struggled to accept chemotherapy, and I experienced severe side effects. Despite following every precaution, I faced additional health challenges, including kidney stones and chickenpox during my last chemotherapy session.

Before my illness, I loved riding my bike, but during treatment, I found myself in a wheelchair—a sight I never imagined. One of the most heart-wrenching moments for me was seeing my father pushing my wheelchair. I had always dreamed of giving him a comfortable life, of having him sit beside me in a car, never imagining that one day, he would be the one pushing me through hospital corridors. That moment was deeply emotional, but instead of breaking me, it became the turning point of my journey. It ignited within me a determination to stand on my own feet again, to fight back, and to reclaim my independence.

One significant challenge was our living conditions. We lived in a slum behind public toilets—an environment highly susceptible to infections. The doctors advised us to move to a cleaner place, and thanks to contributions from relatives and friends, we managed to shift to a nearby housing colony. By the end of my treatment, my weight had dropped from 62 kg to a frail 35 kg, and my appearance had drastically changed. I looked like a mere skeleton, but my spirit remained unbroken.

Throughout my treatment, the fear of recurrence haunted me. I often wondered what would happen if, despite all efforts, I didn't make it. As the treatment concluded, I rigorously followed every piece of advice from my doctors. I was prescribed Imatinib for maintenance, but due to side effects like myositis, it was later replaced with Dasatinib.

Although I won my battle against cancer, I lost my job in the process. However, life had another plan for me. I received an opportunity from the Gunvati J Kapoor Medical Relief Charitable Foundation (GJK) to work in a patient guidance program. This role not only helped me restart my professional journey but I have just crossed 10 years working for GJK and in these years I have supported others facing similar struggles through the foundation, motivated and encouraged similar patients like me at various support groups, conference and emphasised that cancer does not mean an end to life, but a new beginning. Working near the hospital where I had fought for my life kept my fears of future complications at bay and strengthened my resolve to help others.

My battle with cancer also taught me the true meaning of the words “Take care.” Earlier, I had dismissed these words casually, but after my recovery, I embraced them wholeheartedly. In the past few years, I have started training and successfully completed 5km, 10km Marathon and 25km cyclathon and I learned to prioritize my health above all else. Now, people who meet me often find it hard to believe I once had cancer. Even the doctors who treated me are amazed at my transformation.

If someone asks me what cancer meant to me, I would say that at the time, it was terrifying. But over time, I mentally prepared myself for any uncertainties that lay ahead. Today, I see this phase as the second innings of my life. I am not alone in this journey—many, from young children to senior citizens, endure this battle. My experience has given me a new perspective on life, one where health and self-care come first.

Through my journey, I hope to inspire and support others, proving that even in the face of adversity, there is hope, resilience, and a chance for a new beginning. Today, I stand not only as a survivor but as someone who has turned pain into purpose, using my experience to guide and support others walking a similar path.