

Amity family thankful for young girl's fighting chance

As Sophia Hogan, 3, battles a rare bone marrow disorder, she has a big-brother donor and a community that's helping her family through it all.

By Michelle Park
Reading Eagle

It's not that Jim and Misty Hogan weren't thankful for family, health and community before.

But in the days and months that led to this Thanksgiving, they've come to appreciate those things more.

Their 3-year-old daughter, Sophia, was very sick. Her diagnosis fractured their life, reminding them that nothing is a given.

Jim, 34, and Misty, 32, of Amity Township doubted Sophia would be home for the holiday. But she came home Saturday, reuniting after several weeks away from her siblings, JT, 7; Tucker, 4; and 18-month-old Bailey.

"When something like this happens, it really makes you stop," Jim said. "It's a reality check. It's, 'You know what, thank the Lord for what we do have.'"

"I will never again take it for granted."

A child falls ill

The bruises on Sophia were large and strikingly bright blue. Jim and Misty first noticed them in July. The slightest bumps were leaving alarming bruises.

Don't touch your sister, they told their sons. No wrestling.

Sophia also began to lose her strength and appetite.

That prompted a checkup at Reading Pediatrics in Exeter Township, where a doctor suspected leukemia and recommended the Hogans take Sophia straight to a children's hospital.

Dr. Robert J. Greiner at Hershey Medical Center also suspected Sophia had leukemia, but when tests revealed no leukemia blasts in her blood, doctors checked her bone marrow.

Jim assured his wife that they could handle whatever the future held. It's going to be a bumpy road, he told her, but we'll do what we need to.

"There were nights when I was just like, 'Oh my God, I just want this feeling to go away,'" Misty recalled. "It was like a bad dream."

Their second day at Hershey, Sept. 23, they learned that doctors hadn't found cancer cells. What they found was very little cellular content in Sophia's bone marrow.

The Hogans received a definitive diagnosis: Sophia had severe aplastic anemia, a rare bone marrow disorder.

Stepping up for Sophia

Doctors call it bone marrow.

Sophia calls it "bow and arrow."

It's what produces the body's red blood cells, white blood cells and platelets

Related Articles

[Aplastic anemia](#)

[Sophia fundraisers](#)

[+] [Enlarge. \(7 pictures\)](#)



Reading Eagle: Jeremy Drey
Sophia Hogan gets a kiss from her mother, Misty, in their Amity Township home this week. A rare ailment that led to chemotherapy and cost the youngster her hair had the family fearing she wouldn't be home for Thanksgiving.

its what produces the body's red blood cells, white blood cells and platelets.

Severe aplastic anemia meant that Sophia's bone marrow wasn't producing nearly enough of those life-sustaining cells, putting her at risk for bleeding and infection. Without treatment, it could be fatal.

Drug therapy was one option. But the best-case scenario, doctors told the Hogans, would be a bone marrow transplant from a sibling.

Misty and Sophia began making one to three trips to Hershey a week so Sophia could receive blood work and transfusions.

The days were long, and the Hogans had three other children who needed care and had to get to school and sports practices.

A community didn't leave the family to go it alone.

Volunteers, including members of two Douglassville-area MOMS Clubs and the Blazer Mat Club, a youth wrestling league in which Jim coaches, stepped in to tackle everyday demands.

They did laundry and grocery shopping and held fundraisers to help offset medical expenses.

MOMS Club members have prepared dinner for the family every night since late September, and people are signed up to cook for them through early December, said Stephanie L. Conlon, a club member and Misty's friend.

A community became an extended family.

"I don't care how strong you are, when something like this happens to your children, you need support," Jim said. "There is no way that we could ever in a thousand lifetimes repay what they've done for us. It's absolutely amazing."

A match is found

The Hogans hoped fervently that one of their children could make Sophia better. They had each child tested for a bone marrow match.

Greiner said there is roughly a one-in-four chance of a sibling being a match.

About a week after the tests in October, the doctor called the Hogan house. The news was breathtaking: Tucker, Sophia's older brother, and Bailey, her younger sister, were matches.

Misty began to shake. She couldn't wait to call Jim.

"I just remember thinking, 'Oh my God, this is one of the happiest moments of my life,'" Misty recalled. "At that point, I thought, 'We have the best-case scenario. She's going to be healthy and fine in a much shorter period of time than we thought.'"

Greiner recommended that Tucker, the bigger and stronger of the two children, be the donor.

Sitting around the dinner table with their children that night, Jim and Misty broke the news.

JT was quite excited he was off the hook, Misty remembered. Tucker was happy, but nervous. His parents reminded him that this was his chance to be a superhero.

Within two weeks, the transplant was set in motion. Sophia underwent drug therapy and chemotherapy for a week to wipe out her body's bone marrow.

The night before the donation, Jim and Tucker traveled to the town house near Hershey, where Misty and Sophia would live for several weeks. The housing was paid for by the Penn State Hershey Four Diamonds Fund.

By 7:30 a.m. the next day, Oct. 26, Tucker and his father were in the operating room, and by 10 a.m., Tucker's stem cells were traveling into his sister. The transplant lasted more than two hours.

Tucker was a big boy. He didn't complain. Later, he didn't want to take off his bandages. In truth, he is his family's superhero.

"To us, it meant saving Sophia's life, really, or at least giving her a full lifespan," Misty said.

"They don't realize what they've done," Jim said of Tucker and Sophia. "But when they get older, there's going to be a special bond there. They're going to realize what they've gone through together."

A prognosis to be thankful for

Though she's less fazed by it now, Sophia is very conscious about the hair she lost, a casualty of chemotherapy.

And she doesn't like the greenish-blue medical mask she must wear anytime she's outside her family's house or vehicle.

But there is much for which to be thankful. Sophia's down to needing only weekly visits to Hershey Medical Center, and her body is producing cells and platelets. In fact, her platelet counts are normal. Her red and white blood cell counts still are low.

Sophia, her doctor said, is a fighter.

But she's not out of the woods. Today marks Day 31 of an important post-transplant period. In 100 days, if Sophia doesn't develop a condition called graft-versus-host, she's less likely to develop it in the future.

The complication occurs when donated bone marrow or stem cells attack a recipient's body. It can occur at any time, and chronic flare-ups often occur in matched-sibling transplants.

Jim and Misty know the road ahead is long. But their family is together again, and they are thankful.

"You love the noise," Jim said as all four of his children sat Tuesday at the kitchen table, coloring. "You love the screaming. You realize how much that makes our family.

"You just take it for granted, what that represents. It represents us. We're together."

Contact Michelle Park: 610-371-5022 or mpark@readingeagle.com.

