spotlight on health

High School Senior Manages A Rare Disorder While Pursuing Her Dreams

Breanna Hardy Is Dedicated To Controlling Her PKU And Dreams Of Helping Others Do The Same

(NAPSA)—Breanna Hardy, a 17-year-old from Franklin, Wis., was only a few days old when doctors diagnosed her with phenylketonuria (PKU) following a standard heel-prick blood test. Though only 1 in 15,000 infants test positive for the disease, every baby born in the U.S. and most worldwide are tested soon after birth in order to avoid serious health consequences.

People with PKU can't process an essential amino acid called "Phe," which is found in most foods, including nuts, whole grains, meat, dairy and some vegetables and fruit. If PKU is not properly managed from the moment of diagnosis, Phe levels will rise and become toxic to the brain.

Breanna's PKU diagnosis was a shock but her parents picked themselves up, dusted themselves off and embraced the changes that needed to be made to keep her healthy. "My family wanted to provide me with a normal, healthy and happy life," said Breanna. "To us, PKU is simply another way of living."

This attitude guided Breanna throughout her life as she refused to let PKU get in the way of enjoying her hobbies and following her dreams. She has been an avid dancer since she was 3 years old, participating in tap, jazz, lyrical dance and point. She volunteers as a tutor for elementary school children, participates in theatrical performances and in medical lectures about her disease.

Breanna plans to attend Marquette University in Wisconsin, majoring in premed and nursing. Her dream is to attend medical school and eventually train as a metabolic geneticist. She understands the profession first hand, as she has been treated by a metabolic geneticist for years at her Wisconsin clinic.

Breanna Hardy, 17, has PKU and is dedicated to setting a good example for her two sisters who also have the disorder.

"Just in my lifetime, PKU treatment has come so far. I hope to participate in its advancement by helping others like myself," Breanna added.

There is no cure for PKU but the disease can be managed by controlling Phe levels. There are several ways for PKU patients to control their Phe levels, including a strict low-Phe diet and daily medicine. For certain patients, the combination of diet and medicine can help control Phe levels more than just diet alone. It's important for PKU patients to adhere to their treatment plan, as high Phe levels can cause severe complications, like IQ loss, slower thinking, concentration problems and mental retardation.

Despite carefully controlling her Phe levels through diet, Breanna often complained of fatigue and difficulty concentrating. When she heard about a clinical trial for a PKU medicine, Breanna knew it was time to take the next step in controlling her Phe levels and enrolled. Clinical trials are designed to test the safety and the effectiveness of new drugs before they are approved for sale.

Breanna started to take the PKU medicine in combination with her Phe-restricted diet and responded well. A few months later, the medicine was approved by the FDA.

"It's extremely important to me to keep my levels low to protect my brain and body," said Breanna. When she started taking the PKU medicine, she began feeling physically and mentally better and gained a degree of freedom within her Phe-restricted diet. She is now able to concentrate better and is more alert.

"I believe that controlling my Phe levels through a combination of drug and diet has helped me feel this way," she said. "And with my busy schedule, being able to reach my full mental potential is absolutely essential to getting everything done!"

Breanna will head off to her first year at college feeling physically and mentally prepared for the activities and challenges ahead, so she can start her journey toward becoming a metabolic geneticist.

To learn more about PKU, please visit www.pku.com.