

Not Pre-Existing

PAST MEDICAL HISTORY

- Allergies
- Diabetes
- High blood pressure
- Cancer
- Hepatitis

I can still remember the very last time I called to schedule a blood donation. Donating blood was something I used to do regularly—it was a way I could give back.

But, this particular call was the first time I tried to donate after being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. And that day, I learned a brand new phrase: “permanent deferral.” It’s an odd phrase, really, and full of a harsh finality.

In the grand scheme of things, it wasn’t a big deal in and of itself. However, this happened to be the first time I truly felt different after my MS diagnosis. It reminded me that, even on days when I feel fine and people would never guess there’s anything “wrong” with me, I was no longer existing as I once had. Now, I was navigating through life with an unpredictable pre-existing condition.

That’s another odd phrase, and one that seems to contradict itself. How can something pre-exist? Don’t things—and people—simply exist?

Of course these words are a technical term used primarily for insurance purposes—you’ll often hear it used to describe a condition for which someone has received treatment before enrolling in a new insurance plan.

Nationally, it has become a heated, heavy phrase, and in all honesty, I don’t have all the answers. I’m not able to solve the tangled web of problems surrounding the topic of health insurance. But it is frustrating that people can be defined by this “pre-existing” label.

Because let me tell you, pre-existing conditions can sneak up on any one of us.

Sometimes they surprise you overnight—that's what happened to me. One night back in 2013, I went to bed perfectly healthy. The next morning I woke up with a numb foot. The symptoms progressed over the course of the next several weeks until I struggled to walk at times. Then, following a series of tests, I received my MS diagnosis—I received my “pre-existing” label.

There's no crystal ball to gaze into to tell you whether someone you know—or even you—will be diagnosed with a pre-existing condition someday. But here's the thing: despite any hardships we face, any labels we are stuck with, all of us just want to live our best life possible. All of us want to have access to the best treatment and care possible—and receive the respect and compassion everyone deserves.

My life might not look exactly as it used to. I might not be able to do all the things I once could. But I am thriving with my pre-existing condition—and I plan to continue to do so, with my friends and family by my side. I imagine many people labeled “pre-existing” would say the same.

So please, remember the person behind the label. They are more than their pre-existing condition, and they want to thrive, succeed, and enjoy life—just like you.