

CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

'We're waiting on God for her miracle to happen'

BRIANNA JEFFRIES | 4 | LIVER | Waiting for six months

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Four-year-old Brianna Jeffries loves bananas, pancakes and her grandma's fried chicken.

But no matter what she eats, she remains smaller than other kids her age because her liver has all but shut down.

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Brianna Jeffries, 4, has been waiting for a liver transplant for six months.

(Rich Hein/Sun-Times)

PHOTO GALLERY



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Brianna has a rare cancerlike condition that ultimately destroyed the bile ducts in her liver. Without them, Brianna's liver can't absorb fat from the food she eats, leaving her chronically malnourished.

A liver transplant would allow her to grow to a normal height and weight. But Brianna can't get one until complications from her illness -- Langerhans cell histiocytosis -- can be brought under control.

As sick as she is, it's hard to see Brianna as anything other than a lively preschooler who likes "Dora the Explorer," drawing pictures and singing "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" to all who will listen.

"She's definitely the life of the floor," Brianna's mom, Veronica Jeffries, said while watching her daughter chat with nurses at the University of Chicago's Comer Children's Hospital.

Brianna had to stay at the hospital for days at a time last month while undergoing chemotherapy to kill off the histiocytosis -- overproduction of a type of white blood cell in her liver and other organs.

As the little girl explained it, the chemo "flushes the blood out and flushes the blood back in . . . to make me feel better."

And spending so much time at the hospital is no big deal, Brianna said, "because I love the playground."

Her biggest problem most days is itchy skin -- a side-effect of liver failure. At 31 pounds, she's also underweight for her age, even though she eats a high-calorie diet and drinks three PediaSure nutritional drinks a day.

Brianna was 2 when she was diagnosed with histiocytosis. After a year of chemotherapy, the disease seemed to be in remission. Then, a few months later, Veronica Jeffries noticed swelling in Brianna's stomach and asked her doctor to run some tests. The disorder had returned.

The setback means Brianna will have to wait longer for a new liver. She'd been on the transplant waiting list since November but was temporarily downgraded to "inactive" status while on chemotherapy. That meant she wasn't eligible to receive an organ if one became available.

Jeffries said the waiting is nerve-wracking, but so is thinking about what could go wrong during a transplant. "That's the kind of situation where she can make it, or she can not make it," Jeffries said. "I break down crying sometimes. But I don't let nobody see me."

Jeffries adopted Brianna after her birth mother abandoned her at the hospital. She was already the adoptive mother of Brianna's older brother, so the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services approached Jeffries about taking in his sister, too. She also has two other adopted children.

A hairdresser in Dolton, Jeffries had to scale back her workload to care for Brianna. She relies heavily on her mother, other relatives and close friends to help look after the kids when she's at the hospital with Brianna.

A transplant would be "a miracle." Said Jeffries, "We're waiting on God for her miracle to happen."

Monifa Thomas

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