

Surgery helped her become a normal teenager

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Chronic illness is nothing new to Savanna Ellis, 19, a recent high school graduate from Rosedale, Queens. In elementary school, she was diagnosed with a condition called nephrotic syndrome—her kidneys release too much protein. So when she began to have abdominal pain during her junior year of high school, she and her mother chalked it up to that.

By the second semester, the problem got much worse. Her pain was making it hard to sleep. Though she didn't tell her mom, she'd been throwing up and having a hard time moving her bowels. Her weight dropped rapidly, from 120 to around 90 pounds.

By March, "Every part of my body was skinny, except my belly. It swelled up like a balloon," she said. "I thought I was going to die."

Her mother, Suezeve, took Savanna to [Long Island Jewish Medical Center](#), where she was diagnosed with [Crohn's disease](#), a type of inflammatory bowel disease. Doctors there referred her to [Cohen Children's Medical Center](#), where she immediately felt comfortable—she'd been going there for years, for her kidney disease.

Savanna's Crohn's had been progressing undetected for quite a while. She'd gotten so sick, it kept her out of school for the rest of the year. Though she completed her coursework online, the situation meant dropping out of activities she enjoyed, like flag football and wrestling.

At the beginning of her last summer as a high school student, Savanna went in for an appointment with her gastroenterologist, [Erica Rabinovich, MD](#). While there, what started as a normal trip to the bathroom became an ordeal.



Getting through her ordeal helped Savanna realize that she can handle just about anything.

"My intestine was so inflamed, nothing could get through," Savanna recalled. "When I finally got back to the exam room, they said, 'Savanna, how do you feel about surgery?'"

She and her mom didn't hesitate to say yes. By now, Cohen Children's had become like a second home.

"That's when I met Dr. Lipskar," Savanna said. "I was scared, but he was wonderful, really bright, bubbling, which made me feel confident."

[Aaron Lipskar, MD](#), a pediatric colorectal surgeon at Cohen Children's, explained the surgery he recommended: a laparoscopic-assisted ileocolic resection. In this minimally invasive procedure, used to treat severe cases of Crohn's, he would remove the inflamed parts of Savanna's small and large intestines. The surgery happened in August, two weeks after Savanna's 18th birthday.

The effects were almost immediate. "I felt 100 percent better just days after the surgery," Savanna said. "I felt normal again."

Thanks to the procedure and a special Crohn's diet, Savanna was able to return to school for her senior year. Initially she had to take it easy, but by spring she'd resumed playing flag football and wrestling. The experience was nearly as emotional for her classmates and teachers as it was for her—her absence had been felt keenly. This successful surgery meant something to all of them: After everything she'd been through, Savanna graduated on time.

"Graduation felt like I accomplished something impossible," she said. "But it made me realize that nothing's impossible."

Savanna still experiences the occasional Crohn's flare, but only when she eats something she shouldn't. She manages the resulting discomfort with rest, plenty of water and acetaminophen, and goes on with her life. Like an ordinary teen.

Next up for her: college, where she plans to study criminal justice. "I want to be either a Secret Service or FBI agent," Savanna said, and she also talks about writing a book about her experiences with Crohn's.

The future will present a whole new set of challenges, but Savanna's looking forward to them. She knows she can handle just about anything.



After surgery gave her relief from Crohn's, Savanna is ready for her next chapter in college.