

My name is Astena Talitha Marsh, and I am 9 years old. When I was born I had congenital heart block, because my mom has lupus.

The doctors at the IWK put a pacemaker into me when I was just 6 hours old. Difficult challenges, like failure to thrive, prevented me from living a full life. I couldn't run far because I tired easily, and whenever I joined my brothers and sisters in the swimming pool, I would turn blue very quickly.

Together with my parents, we visited the hospitals many times; sometimes even by a quick airplane ride. There were many tests that hurt, and made my mom cry and pray harder.

Then, at 3 and 1/2 my world turned upside down. I suffered a sudden and dramatic deterioration. My situation was critical, and not able to improve. The specialists at the IWK couldn't do anything else for me. They airlifted me, during a hurricane, to the Edmonton Stollery Hospital to undergo assessment for a heart transplant.

For 3 months we waited, as I was kept alive by IV drugs. At one point I had 21 tubes connecting me to machines ... which made it too difficult and dangerous to leave my bed.

Miraculously, on the feast of the 3 kings, 2005, the 7th donor heart was viable. After having dropped to under 3 percent heart function, I had a tremendous recovery! Doctor Coe told us, "It's amazing how well you became when you had a good pump!"

After my transplant, we started a new fashion statement ... med style that is for the zipper club. We all began using a toolbox to organize and carry everything we needed. Our family never went anywhere without my toolbox. On the night that our house burned down, Daddy even burnt his legs making sure we didn't escape without it.

Dad says I have probably consumed enough meds to fill the pharmacy ... or that's how many he's bought. However, there is one good thing about blood-work, lab visits and all the tests. I leave the hospital with so many finger-puppets, stickers, and stuffed animals, that I used to have two large toy tubs full.

To this day it still freaks me out of my pants to wonder how the doctor's can saw you open when you're asleep in the operating room.

Or... how I could live only on I.V. medicines one day, and eat a hamburger the next. But then, like now, I have really smart doctors, and I know that science and technology is always improving.

I help them by being very serious and listening to what they advise me, and I also work hard at being healthy!

I take the responsibility for eating healthy foods; drinking enough to help my kidneys work properly; and most of all, for taking my heart medications at EXACTLY the right time every day.

I enjoy many fun activities like hip hop abs and ballroom dancing with my dad, and playing tag with my brother's puppy, Sasha, until we are both breathless.

My heart condition wasn't because of my decisions ... but most of yours will be. What will you decide?

Thank-you, everyone