



A collection of personal stories from Veterinary Nurses suffering from a Chronic Illness or Condition.

A personal story by Hannah Campbell



Pre-diagnosis:

Following years of being sick all the time, having no energy and eating double the portion sizes of everyone else but not gaining weight, I was finally taken seriously in 2011. I had missed countless days of school from being so ill and had to miss morning lessons for hospital appointments. At parents evening, my science teacher said that I would struggle if I chose to do A-level science. This really knocked my confidence, and I knew I would have to work even harder to even be considered for a veterinary nursing course.

Getting diagnosed:

It took many blood tests, hospital referrals, and scans prior to my diagnosis via a conscious upper GI endoscopy. From this point I had no choice but to accept my diagnosis and adapt to the gluten free lifestyle. I paid ridiculous prices for loaves of gluten free bread that crumbled everywhere and searched all the supermarkets for food I could eat. Free from aisles were only just being set up and prescription food was still limited.

Eating Out and Cross Contamination:

Unfortunately, I still had the worry of eating out. I had cross-contamination a few times and this meant being severely ill for almost 24 hrs straight and recovering for the next few weeks. These experiences were extremely frustrating as I had no control and was left to deal with my body attacking itself.

University experience:

I was so excited to start my veterinary nursing degree but worried about maintaining a gluten free diet. I knew I wouldn't be tempted to eat anything containing gluten but was petrified of cross-contamination. Fortunately, my flatmates were very understanding and as gluten free diets were becoming trendier, they knew what I needed to avoid. I made some amazing supportive friends, and this really helped me gain confidence when ordering at restaurants and explaining the seriousness of my condition. When it came to grad ball ordering a GF meal wasn't even an issue so I could relax and celebrate all of our achievements without any worry.

Experience in Practice:

As an RVN I try to get on with my job and not worry about coeliac disease. I have to admit most days are fairly normal compared to others living with chronic illnesses. I know that my illness isn't always understood, especially when I don't look physically ill all the time. I count myself extremely lucky that by following a strict gluten free diet and taking vitamins/supplements I can have a 'normal' lifestyle. That said I dread 'lunch and learns' as reps don't always understand why a gluten free diet is a necessity for me. I would also love to do a volunteering programme with animals abroad but the stress of arranging gluten free food does make me hesitant.

When I was offered my covid job back in March I received many questions from management as to why I was eligible. Luckily 10 years on from my initial diagnosis I am confident enough to explain coeliac diseases and why I was in the clinically vulnerable priority group of the vaccine rollout. However, I do think that employers should be more accepting of health conditions, and not question someone just because they 'look' young and healthy.

Taking Care of Myself:

As RVNs I feel it is important we look after ourselves especially now as we deal with the knock-on effects of the pandemic. As an RVN with a chronic illness it is even more important not to burn out, so health isn't affected further. Personally, I have my own little self-care routines and ways of looking after myself. I also find routine helps me to stay grounded.

- If I have achieved something I reward myself by trying out new GF recipes or treating myself to new GF products
- During lockdown I started to introduce short yoga sessions to my day and enjoyed regular walks. This improved my mental and physical health
- I regularly read a book before bed to wind down and I also have a Sunday night routine to get me ready for the week ahead. This differs but generally consists of having a hot bath, applying a face mask, doing a covid test and watching a movie. This is usually followed by me writing a list of things that need to be done during the upcoming week.

