

Transform a life, and your own

Meet Mary Jo

When Mary Jo was born, her parents did not know there was a high risk that she would develop Beta Thalassemia Intermedia. They were asymptomatic, but because both parents carried the thalassemia trait, their children could be born with the genetic disorder that reduces the body's ability to produce healthy red blood cells. The disease substantially shortens the lifespan of red blood cells and deposits waste in the organs. This also forces the body to work overtime to create new red blood cells, producing even more waste to be deposited in the organs. Without enough healthy red blood cells, the disease triggers severe anemia and impacts normal growth and development.

Mary Jo seemed healthy when she was born, but by age five, Beta Thalassemia symptoms began to appear. Doctors recommended a warmer climate for her health, so the family moved to Arizona. Mary Jo was often tired, had low energy and kept getting ear infections. She couldn't enjoy many things she loved, including sports. She had also become severely anemic, so she began blood transfusion therapy – a need that is expected to continue the rest of her life. Her stomach began to enlarge, a sign that her spleen was also enlarging because of waste and iron from the escalated cycle of her red blood cells. By the time her spleen was removed at 9 years old, it weighed 5 pounds; a normal spleen weighs about 6 ounces.

Mary Jo had received nearly 100 blood transfusions by the time she was an adult, working as a nurse and ready to start a family. While pregnant, she became severely anemic because most of the oxygen and nutrients in her blood went to keep her baby alive. She required type O-negative blood every two weeks, but donors were not easy to find. She had developed so many antibodies in her blood from chronic transfusions, it often took up to a week to find a



“If it weren't for my donors, I would not be able to be a mom, to be a nurse or to be alive, Every day is a blessing. I am so grateful for my blood donors!”

specially matched donor. She had five miscarriages before she was able to have a successful pregnancy. Finally, her “miracle baby” Sophia was born.

Grateful for the blood transfusions that she received during her pregnancies, Mary Jo has hosted more than 20 blood drives in her community. She worked as a floor nurse for 25 years at Valley hospitals before retiring at the beginning of the pandemic. The Beta Thalassemia Intermedia had taken a toll on her body, and she was at high risk for illness without a spleen to provide infection-fighting white blood cells. Although she has lost exact count of her number of transfusions over 50 years, Mary Jo estimates she has relied on the generosity of more than 250 blood donors and the lifesaving blood keeps coming.

Mary Jo has two healthy grown children, is retired and lives in Phoenix.



For more information or to schedule a donation, call **877-25-VITAL** or visit us at **vitalant.org**

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