

DEFYING THE ODDS

TLC's T-Boz opens up about her illness and her will to succeed

Take one look at the beautiful Grammy-winning Tionne "T-Boz" Watkins, and you'd never know she has spent a lifetime battling a serious disease. As the "T" in TLC, one of the most successful female singing groups of all time, T-Boz didn't let on to her fans that she has struggled to stay healthy throughout her 35 years. But now, feeling better than ever, T-Boz talks to *OK!* about the disease she's dealt with since childhood — sickle cell anemia — and how she hasn't let it hold her back.

WHAT IS SICKLE CELL ANEMIA?

Sickle cell anemia is an inherited blood disorder, in which a person's red blood cells (normally soft and round) sometimes become sickled, or crescent-shaped. This makes it difficult for the red blood cells, which carry oxygen, to pass through small blood vessels. When sickle-shaped cells block small blood vessels, less blood and oxygen are able to get to various tissues in the body. This can lead to organ damage, infections, stroke and episodes called sickle cell crisis (which can last hours or days and often result in intensely sharp

FAMILY TIES

If sickle cell disease runs in your family, get a blood test to see if you carry the trait. If both you and your partner are carriers, your child has a 25 percent chance of having the disease, so talk to your doctor before conceiving.



Doctors once thought T-Boz, a spokesperson for the Sickle Cell Disease Association of America, would not be able to have children. She calls Chase (almost five) her "miracle baby."



T-Boz and Chilli are searching for a girl to sing with them on their UPN show. "It's not about replacing Lisa [above, left]. It's about fulfilling a special girl's dream," says T-Boz.

T-BOZ'S TRIUMPH

pain). As T-Boz describes it, you feel like "someone is stabbing you with a sharp knife constantly." And as its name suggests, sickle cell anemia can also cause anemia (a reduced number of red blood cells), which leads to extreme fatigue, among other things. "Though the body does its best to destroy the sickled red blood cells, it is unable to produce new cells fast enough. This causes the anemia," says Dr. Anthony Stallion, a surgeon at the Cleveland Clinic's children's hospital and a board member of the American Sickle Cell Anemia Association. About 70,000 Americans have sickle cell disease, and most of those affected are of African, South American, Mediterranean, Middle Eastern or Indian descent. Experts estimate that one of every 500 African-American children and one of every 1,250 Hispanic-American children are born with the disease.

For T-Boz, having sickle cell disease meant that she spent much of her childhood on the sidelines. "I spent the first seven years of my life in the hospital a lot," she says. "I wasn't able to go swimming. I couldn't get any colds or infections without getting really sick. You name it, I couldn't do it. You push me too hard, and I have a sickle cell crisis." T-Boz would frequently go to the hospital to get pain medication and IV fluid (to hydrate cells and help the flow of blood and oxygen). "Doctors said I would never have kids, that I would never sing and dance — that I would be on disability my whole life," she remembers. "And I have gone against everything they said."

How did the struggling young girl grow up to be the strong, accomplished woman she is

today? T-Boz credits her mom with empowering her. "My mom always made me feel normal. She just said, 'You have some things you can't do, but if you learn how to work around them, you can still have fun, and you can still do things,'" says T-Boz. "My mom did not raise me to sit around and wait to be fixed. These are the cards I was dealt, so I try to figure out how to make the best of them." To that end, T-Boz dreamed big, prayed often and learned what worked for her body so that she was ultimately able to go on tour, have a baby, open a children's boutique called Chase's Closet (named after her daughter) and now, star in the UPN reality show *R U The Girl?*

LIVING WITH THE DISEASE

There is no cure for sickle cell anemia except for bone marrow transplantation, which is a very risky procedure, and few people find a matching donor. But gene-therapy research is under way, and treatments have improved in recent years, says Dr. Stallion. There are more options for patients, including new medicines and, in severe cases, blood transfusions, says Dr. Stallion. "People with the disorder are living longer now than they ever have," he adds. For T-Boz, the most important thing has been learning to manage her symptoms to keep her condition in check. For most people with the disease, that means avoiding stress, staying hydrated and rested, eating nutritious meals and visiting the doctor regularly, says Dr. Catherine Driscoll, a sickle cell expert at the Children's Hospital at Montefiore in New York City. "It's also important to adjust for weather changes," she says. Why? "When it's cold, blood vessels constrict and make it harder for cells to get through. And when it's hot, you can get dehydrated, which deprives cells of oxygen, thickens blood and leads to blockages." A crucial strategy for T-Boz is to have a positive outlook: "I believe that when my spirits are high, it helps me get better," she says. "Yeah, some of my days are down and I have a lot of pain, but I've had a lot of good days, too, and there are a lot of people who can't say that. So I tell myself all the time that when you have those up days, you've got to enjoy life to the fullest."

For more information or to find out how you can help, visit the American Sickle Cell Anemia Association, ascaa.org; or the Sickle Cell Disease Association of America, sicklecelldisease.org. **OK!**

FEATURE BY RACHEL RABKIN



To raise awareness, Las Vegas star James Lesure will welcome two teens with sickle cell disease to his NBC set in mid-September.

RUMOR OR REAL DEAL?

RUMOR: CALCIUM HELPS EASE PMS.

REAL DEAL: It's true. Recent research in the *Archives of Internal Medicine* shows that eating a diet rich in calcium and vitamin D may lower the risk of developing premenstrual syndrome (PMS). Previous studies have found that calcium and vitamin D can help treat existing PMS, and now, this research suggests that the nutrients may help stave it off altogether. How much of the nutrients do you need to prevent PMS symptoms such as bloating, cramping, breast tenderness and moodiness? Experts recommend that you eat about four servings of dairy (low-fat or fat-free milk, yogurt or cheese) or calcium-fortified orange juice daily — the equivalent of about 1,200 milligrams of calcium and about 400 IU of vitamin D.

ASK RACHEL

Our health director answers your top questions



DEAR RACHEL I play squash, but lately my elbow hurts. Any advice?

● It sounds like you have tennis elbow, which is technically called lateral epicondylitis. It's a common overuse injury of the muscles and tendons on the outside of the elbow. It can also cause tension in the muscles around the forearm and wrist. According to Dr. Scott Herron, an orthopedic surgeon and director of the Advanced Orthopaedic Surgery Center in Temecula, Calif., treatment is pretty simple: Ice the tender areas, stretch the muscles regularly and if you're feeling intense pain, take a pain reliever like Advil. If that doesn't help, talk to your doctor about getting physical therapy. There, you will probably learn exercises that stretch and strengthen your wrist, which can speed healing. Your therapist may also recommend an elbow strap, which can alleviate muscle tension. With any luck, it may only take a few weeks to heal. You'll increase your chances of a fast recovery if you give your elbow a rest and ease back into squash only after your symptoms have improved.

DEAR RACHEL

Is a raw-food diet a good idea?

● In a word, no. It's an impractical way to live, and it doesn't offer a real health benefit, says Dr. Domingo Piñero, assistant professor of nutrition at New York University. Raw-food advocates believe that cooking food destroys its nutrients. But that's often not the case. "In fact, with some foods, it's only when you cook them that certain compounds become available to the body," says Dr. Piñero. For instance, take the tomato, which contains the beneficial micronutrient lycopene. Boiling the tomato is what releases the lycopene so that it becomes more accessible to the body. Add a little olive oil to make, say, tomato sauce, and that fat will act as a carrier of the lycopene and further help its absorption by the body. "A similar thing happens with protein," says Dr. Piñero. "When you cook proteins, they unfold and change structure so that they're more easily digestible." A caveat: Raw foodies insist that cooking vegetables in the microwave will zap them of some nutrients — and they may be right. But eating raw food is not the only alternative to nuking it. Steam your vegetables, or sauté them, and you'll preserve their nutrients. You'll also be more likely to enjoy them.

IF YOU HAVE A HEALTH OR FITNESS QUESTION, E-MAIL askrachel@ok-magazine.com OR WRITE TO: ASK RACHEL, OK! MAGAZINE, 475 5TH AVE., NEW YORK, NY 10017

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HEALTH BITE

SMOKE SCREEN

A study shows that smoking in films is no longer associated with glamour. These days, the characters who are most likely to be smoking in big studio movies are the bad guys rather than the heroes. It seems Hollywood's take on cigarettes is catching up with the surgeon general's.