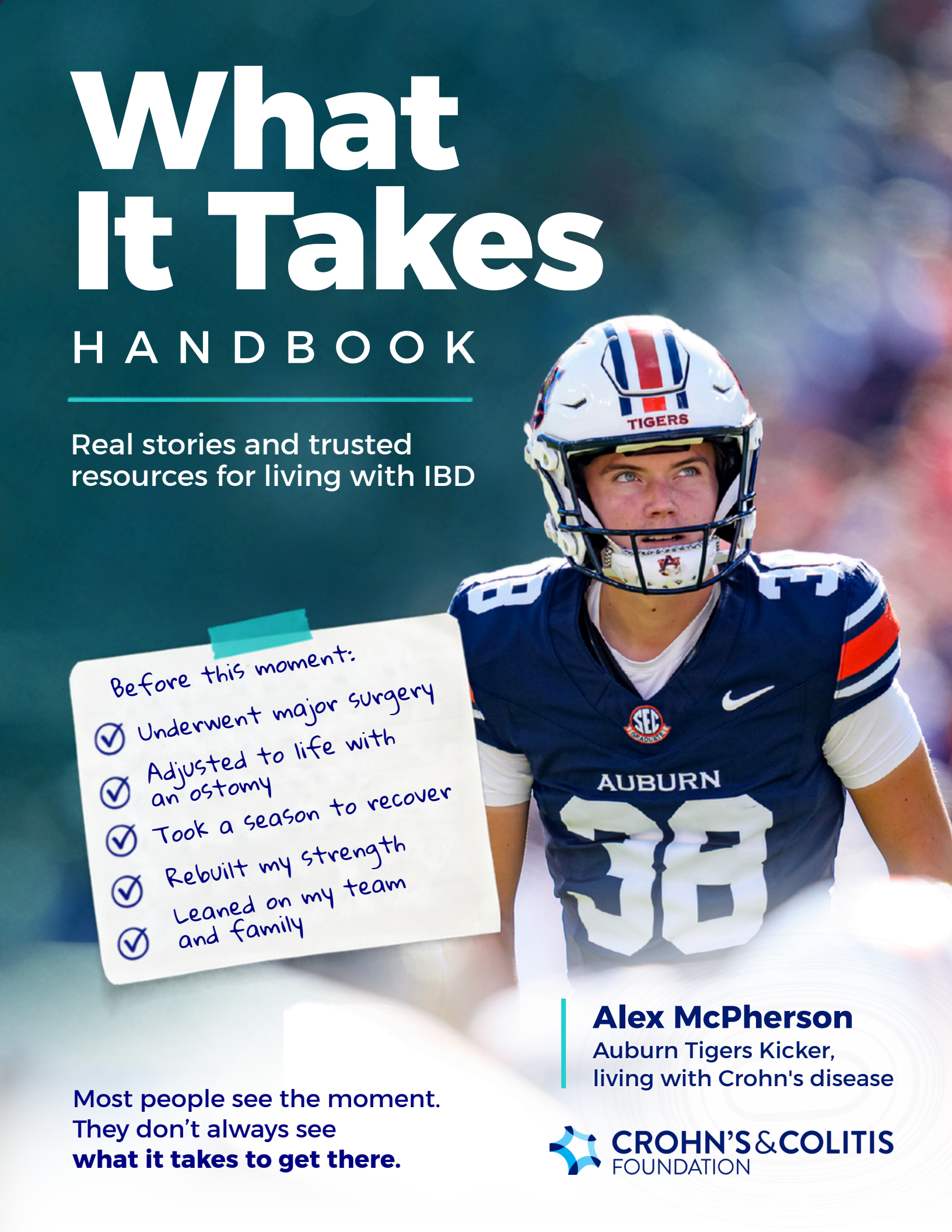
What It Takes

HANDBOOK

Real stories and trusted resources for living with IBD



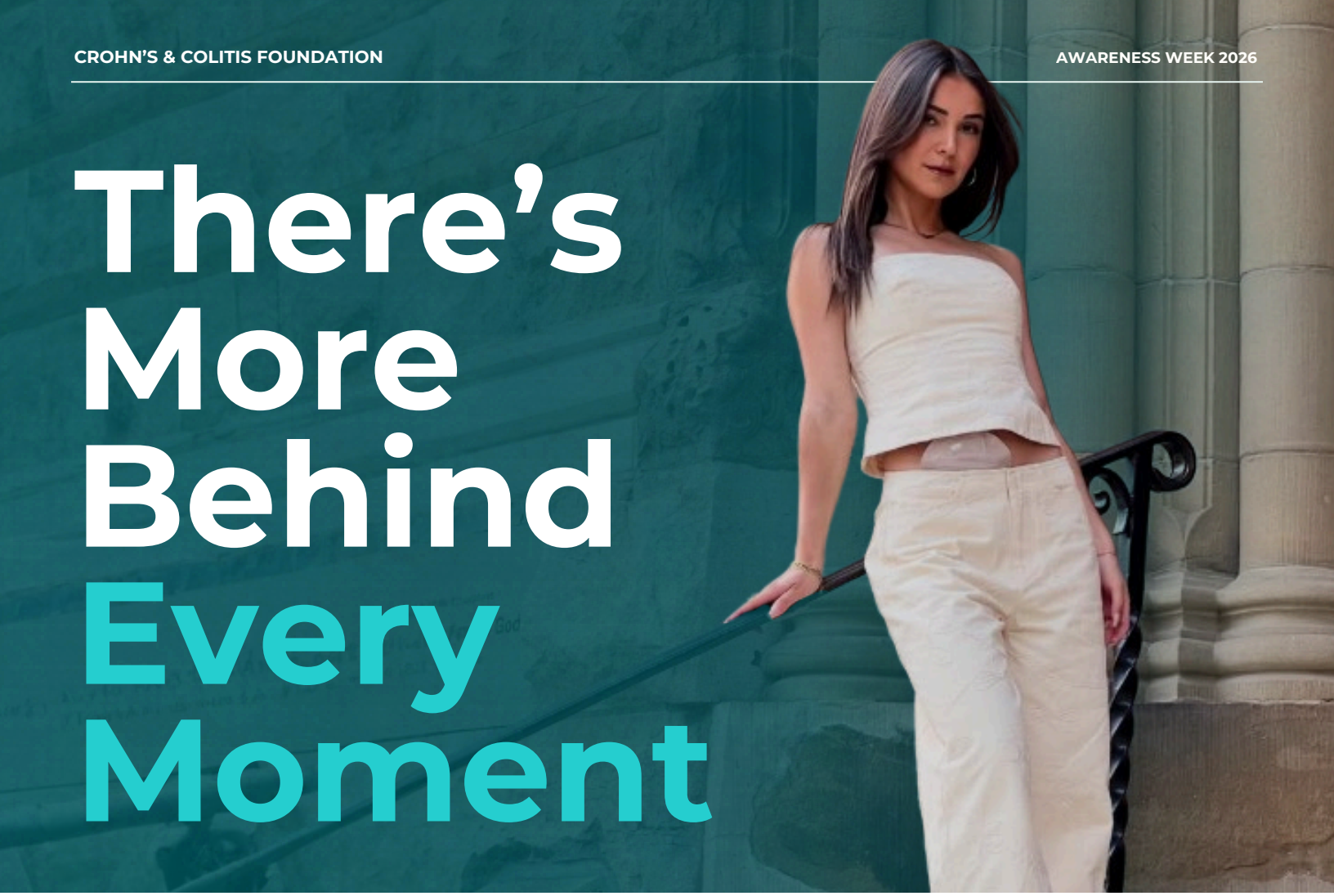
Before this moment:

- ✓ Underwent major surgery
- ✓ Adjusted to life with an ostomy
- ✓ Took a season to recover
- ✓ Rebuilt my strength
- ✓ Leaned on my team and family

Alex McPherson
Auburn Tigers Kicker,
living with Crohn's disease

Most people see the moment.
They don't always see
what it takes to get there.

CROHN'S & COLITIS FOUNDATION



There's More Behind Every Moment

Living with Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis can mean navigating challenges others may not see, affecting everything from work and family to travel and everyday life.

That's why we created the *What It Takes Handbook*. Through six real-life stories, meet people living with IBD and see what it takes to keep pursuing what matters to them. Along the way, find trusted Crohn's & Colitis Foundation resources and practical strategies to support your own journey.

Because what it takes can look different for everyone.

ABOUT THE CROHN'S & COLITIS FOUNDATION

We are dedicated to finding cures for Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis and improving the quality of life for children and adults affected by these diseases. Learn more about how you can participate and contribute this Crohn's & Colitis Awareness Week by visiting **CrohnsColitisFoundation.org/AwarenessWeek.**

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TAKE #1

What It Takes
TO CHASE A GOAL WITH IBD



What it took:

- Undergoing major surgery
- Learning to live with an ostomy
- Taking a season off to recover
- Gradually rebuilding strength
- Leaning on teammates and family

Auburn University Tigers kicker Alex McPherson was diagnosed with ulcerative colitis during his sophomore year after months of worsening symptoms and significant weight loss.

When medication didn't bring his disease under control, he underwent surgery to remove his colon and began living with an ostomy, missing the entire 2024 season as he recovered.

Determined to return to the field, Alex gradually resumed training with support from his medical team, Auburn's athletic staff, coaches, teammates, and family. A Crohn's disease diagnosis brought another setback the following summer, but a change in treatment helped get his symptoms under control. Alex returned for the 2025 season and to the sport he loves.



Alex McPherson
Auburn Tigers Kicker

> ***The hardest days were the ones I tried to handle alone.***
>
> Telling my coaches, my teammates, and my family what I was going through is what got me back. IBD and an ostomy are part of my life now, but they don't decide what I go after."

EXPERT TIP



Getting Active After Surgery Or Flare

Alan Moss, MD
Chief Scientific Officer,
Crohn's & Colitis Foundation

"Whether your goal is running a 5K, a pickup game, or walking around the block again, getting active after surgery or a flare starts with a conversation with your care team. Start slower than you think you need to, build up gradually, and pay attention to how your body responds. Every step counts, and so does every rest day."

EXPLORE MORE

Managing Pain and Fatigue With IBD

Getting back to what you love can mean managing more than a flare. Explore practical ways to manage pain and fatigue and tips for talking with your care team about what you're feeling.



TAKE #2

What It Takes
TO TAKE IBD ON TOUR

Saxophonist Antonio Hancock, known as Saxl Rose, was diagnosed with Crohn's disease at 18 after an emergency hospital visit revealed a blockage that required surgery.

The diagnosis cost him his spot at a military academy but pointed him toward music. He built an audience through his saxophone solos and went on to tour and record with artists including Wiz Khalifa and Paramore.

Life on the road takes planning. Saxl works with his doctor to schedule infusions around tour dates and knows which foods to avoid. For him, what it takes is mapping out the goal, even when the timeline changes.



Saxl Rose
Saxophonist

People may see me on stage, or in the studio, but they don't always see the treatments, planning, doctor visits, and the hard days behind it.

Sharing my story and connecting with other people living with IBD means the world to me. If it helps someone feel a little less alone or share their health journey, I'm glad I shared it."

EXPERT TIP



Coping With IBD Stress and Anxiety

Megan Riehl, PsyD
GI Psychologist and
Foundation Board Member

"Stress and IBD can feed off each other. Stress can worsen symptoms, and symptoms can make life more stressful. One way to break that cycle is activity pacing: plan ahead for what matters most to you, build in time for rest and recovery, and give yourself permission to adjust when your body needs it. You don't have to be on tour to benefit from a plan. It works for a workday, a family event, or a busy week."



EXPLORE MORE

Understanding Stress and Anxiety in IBD

Watch this video to learn how stress and anxiety can affect IBD and find practical strategies to help manage both.

TAKE #3

What It Takes

TO FEEL GOOD ABOUT FOOD AGAIN WITH IBD



Most people see Rachel Dyckman as a registered dietitian helping people with Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis find a way of eating that works for them.

What they don't see is where that started.

Rachel was diagnosed with ulcerative colitis when she was 8 years old.

As she got older, Rachel found that nutrition could be a powerful healing tool alongside her medication and medical care. That experience led her into nutrition, specifically nutrition for people living with IBD.

Today, she helps others with IBD and other digestive issues find out how food can support them as they manage the disease.



Rachel Dyckman, RD
Member, Crohn's & Colitis Foundation
National Scientific Advisory Committee

> ***Food doesn't have to be the enemy.***
>
> When you find what works for your body, it can become part of how you take care of yourself with IBD."

EXPERT TIP



Make Fruits and Veggies Easier On Your Gut

Rachel Dyckman, RD

"Many people with IBD are afraid to eat fruits and vegetables. Raw produce, skins, and seeds can be harder to tolerate and may contribute to symptoms like cramping, gas, or diarrhea, especially during a flare.

But you don't have to cut them out completely. Steaming vegetables until they're fork-tender, blending fruits into a smoothie, or pureeing vegetables into a soup can all help. Reducing particle size and softening the texture may make these foods easier to tolerate."

EXPLORE MORE

Gut Friendly Recipes

Finding what works for you shouldn't mean giving up foods you love. Browse 500+ free, dietitian-approved recipes made with IBD in mind. Filter by diets like low FODMAP or Mediterranean, leave out ingredients that don't agree with you, and build a meal plan that fits your life.

TAKE #4

What It Takes

TO GET TO CAPITOL HILL WHEN YOUR BODY SAYS NO



Most people see the moment: Amber Tresca walking the halls of Capitol Hill, meeting with her legislators, and pushing for more national funding for IBD medical research, better access to treatment for children, with IBD and an end to step therapy.

What they don't see is what it took to get her there.

Amber was diagnosed with ulcerative colitis at age 16. Today she lives with a J-pouch, is a mom of two teenagers, and has spent more than two decades helping patients understand IBD through her writing and her *"About IBD"* Podcast.

This July, she participated in the Foundation's Day on the Hill event in Washington, D.C., which she has done since 2017. She was dealing with joint pain and dehydration, and the temperature was over 100 degrees.

Getting through the day meant planning for fluids, rest, and breaks, and pushing through the pain to make sure lawmakers heard from the families who need them most.

For Amber, showing up is part of what it takes.



Amber Tresca
IBD Advocate

> ***So many people in the IBD community couldn't physically be there.***
>
> I could, so a little pain and a lot of heat were worth it. I was speaking for them."



Your Voice Can Make A Difference

The Foundation's Advocacy Action Network gives people affected by IBD opportunities to speak up on policies that can affect access to care, research, and the IBD community.

ADD YOUR VOICE

Join the Advocacy Action Network

Speak up on policies that affect people living with IBD and help advocate for change alongside people like Amber.

TAKE #5

What It Takes

TO WALK THE RUNWAY WITH AN OSTOMY BAG

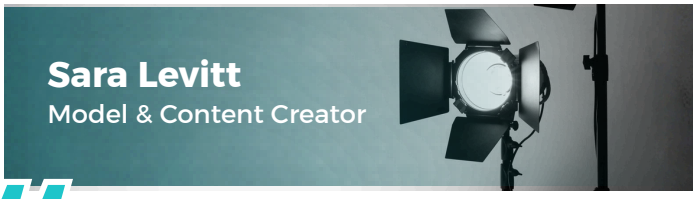


Most people see Sara Levitt on the runway: model, content creator, and a bikini that doesn't hide a thing. What they don't see is what it took to get there.

Sara Levitt was diagnosed with ulcerative colitis at age 3 and Crohn's disease at 11. At 13, she had emergency bowel surgery.

Four more surgeries followed, and she now lives with a permanent ileostomy.
For more than a decade, Sara hid her ostomy. She edited it out of photos, avoided wearing bikinis and low-rise clothes, and worried that people would see her as "gross." The turning point came in 2023. After years of hiding her ostomy, she finally reached a place where she felt comfortable and confident in her private life. Sharing photos with her ostomy bag in full view felt like the final step, making public the part of her life she had spent so long keeping private.

Since then, Sara has walked at New York Fashion Week with her ostomy showing and competed as a Miss Universe Canada delegate, using her platform to challenge stigma around IBD and ostomies.



> ***Surgery gave me my life back.***
>
> But it took 15 years to stop hiding the part of me that saved it, my ostomy. Now I live fully, with nothing to hide."



EXPERT TIP

Finding Strength Through Community

Laurie Keefer, PhD

"Community becomes really important when you're facing a challenge. Community is nice to have when life is going well, but it's essential when things are not going so well. That's because connection, whether that's an emotional bond or sharing a laugh, releases hormones that buffer you against the impact of stress."

EXPLORE MORE

Creating a Future Without Crohn's Disease or Ulcerative Colitis Stigma

Learn how stigma can leave people with IBD feeling embarrassed or alone, and how support groups and awareness campaigns are helping more people speak openly about IBD.



TAKE #6

What It Takes

TO DO IT ALL AND STILL HAVE ROOM FOR ME

Rhonda Bolding is a marketing professional with more than 25 years of experience, a wife to Kevin, and a mom to Kira.

She also previously served on the Crohn's & Colitis Foundation's Board of Trustees.

Rhonda's Crohn's disease symptoms started when she was a child. As an adult, a severe flare kept her in the hospital for about half a year. She was told early in life that he wouldn't be able to have children, and in 2013 Rhonda welcomed Kira, a joy once thought beyond reach.

For Rhonda, what it takes isn't about doing less. It's about managing the day-to-day challenges with resilience, and making room for what fills her up, from her family to giving back.



Rhonda Bolding
Marketing Professional,
Wife & Mom

People see me at work, at home, and in my community and wonder how I do it.

The truth is I don't do it alone. I have a strong support system, and I've learned to ask for help."

EXPLORE MORE

Coping Strategies to Improve Mental Health

Find practical ways to manage stress, build in time to rest, and take care of your emotional well-being while living with IBD.

IBD Takes Strength. Together, We Take Action.



Designed by
Zoe D., 11
Camp Oasis camper living with IBD

Fuel What It Takes

Donate $50+ by December 7 and receive this year's exclusive Awareness Week T-shirt, designed by Zoe D., an 11-year-old Camp Oasis camper living with IBD. Plus, gifts to this campaign made by December 31, 2026, will be matched up to a total of $500,000. Every gift fuels research, resources, and support for people with IBD.

DONATE TODAY

Share What It Takes

Your story can break stigma and help someone else feel less alone. Share what it takes for you to live with IBD and show the world what most people don't see.

Take Action

Speak up for policies that affect the IBD community, or fundraise with the people who have your back. Join Take Steps or start your own effort to push research and awareness forward.