

Success Story: New medical device gets runner back on track

POSTED: 4:00 PM, Jul 28, 2014

TAG: [health and fitness \(/topic/health+and+fitness\)](#)



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Lesley Young/Special to The Commercial Appeal After being diagnosed with idiopathic gastroparesis, Emma Tillman's goal to run a marathon in every state was sidelined. That is until she came up with a mobile nutrition supplement device which she can switch out halfway through the marathon. She will have run her first marathon since her diagnosis Sunday, July 27 in San Francisco.

After training for and completing her first marathon in 2008, Emma Tillman made a pledge to run a marathon in every state.

The following year she got five states closer to that goal, running in Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Missouri, and South Dakota.

Then she became ill.

In 2011 Tillman, now 34, was diagnosed with idiopathic gastroparesis.

“Your stomach doesn’t empty. It gets full, and you end up throwing up a lot. In order to get your nutrition and hydration you need a central IV line,” Tillman, of Midtown, said.

Needless to say Tillman’s marathon hobbies were set aside, which caused some emotional turmoil.

“With any illness you go through phases. First is denial. You think it’s going to get better really soon. Then you get depressed and upset. Then you get to the point of, ‘This is how it is,’” Tillman said.

Once she reached the acceptance phase and learned how to live with using a nutrition and hydration supplement device, Tillman also learned how to run with it.

“I decided to push forward and do what I need to do,” she said.

She was able to get back into training, and last year Tillman completed two half marathons.

“I was excited to get back into the swing of things,” she said.

Then her old dream showed back up, and she was faced with a dilemma.

“I can only do so many hours of activity until I have to hydrate again,” she said.

In February, the University of Tennessee College of Pharmacy assistant professor attended a work conference, where she had the opportunity to meet the doctor who tested one of her nutrition systems, and the exchange breathed new life into her dream.

“(The doctor) gave me a hug and told me I was an inspiration to him, and I was thinking the same thing about him. I told him about my marathon goal, and he brainstormed ideas with me,” Tillman said. “This guy who invented this lifesaving therapy is telling me I’m an inspiration. I just thought, ‘I can do this.’”

So Tillman got to work, and came up with a system using an eclipse infusion pump.

The ball-shaped pump normally is used for antibiotic infusion and can hold 500 milliliters of dextrose and sodium, Tillman said. She wears it like a runner's water belt and can switch it out halfway through the marathon.

She's given the pump a few trial runs, and on Sunday gave her first full marathon a try with her new system, in San Francisco.

After the Sunday race, Tillman was excited: "I finished! It was a very hilly course and I was slower than I planned, but I finished!" she said.

During the race, Tillman raised money for the Oley Foundation, a specialized nutrition support organization. For more information, visit crowdrise.com/hpnawareness/fundraiser/emmatillman (<http://crowdrise.com/hpnawareness/fundraiser/emmatillman>).

Have you lost weight and kept it off, adopted better eating habits, started exercising or had success living a more healthful lifestyle? Email your story to sunyata00@gmail.com (<mailto:sunyata00@gmail.com>).

Emma Tillman

Age: 34

Home: Midtown

What she did: After being diagnosed with the life-altering illness idiopathic gastroparesis, which calls for intravenous nutrition and hydration supplements, Tillman figured out a way to continue her dream of running a marathon in every state by coming up with her own supplement device.

Advice: "It doesn't matter how fast you are or how good you are, just get out there and do it. Give it your best shot."