

Hydrochloric Acid Blues by Katina Pontikes

Abstract: Stomach acid is an unseen factor in the digestive process. However, for some people it is threatening because of the suffering it can inflict. Despite numerous physicians doing their best to ease the ailments caused by my acidity issues, I have suffered more than one long bout of struggling to moderate this culprit. An embarrassing incident, long ago when I was in the third grade, resulted in hydrochloric acid having a starring role as a villain in my life.

Keywords: stomach acid, hydrochloric acid, grade school, shame, doctors

Third grade class at Immaculate Conception school was composed of about thirty students, young, shiny-faced beacons of potential. I was among the throng of hope, anxious to do everything to the high expectations of my mother and my godmother.

"You are the oldest child. All the other children will follow your lead, so you must set a good example at all times." No pressure there, eternal perfection the goal.

I had a history of stomachaches. Nausea. Cramping. Vague discomfort. The school nurse was accustomed to my regular visits. She mentioned them to my aunt, a nurse supervisor at the hospital, who was visiting the school. My aunt looked at me briefly, and answered over her shoulder "Nerves." It was an unofficial diagnosis, but I could tell the school nurse believed it. She didn't write a note, just picked up the phone to summon my overburdened mother to interrupt her day and rescue me.

I must have complained one too many times. Someone decided to call in the specialists. I was paraded for all sorts of tests, all stressful to me. Every doctor looked at me with too much earnestness, an intensity I would rather have avoided. And the questions were so embarrassing! How much did I go to the bathroom? Why ask such a nosy question? Not ladylike at all!

Finally, in the absence of a terminal disease diagnosis, someone determined that I needed more acid in my stomach. The remedy was a highly unusual prescription of hydrochloric acid, eight drops from a bottle to an eight ounce glass of water. This foul liquid was to be consumed three times a day with meals.

Teachers were skeptical, and I had to explain my malady over and over, explain that the doctors demanded this regime. I would carefully cradle my tiny brown bottle with my books, secured by the one inch wide red rubber book strap, carefully hooking the bottle so that it lay tightly against my books.

One day after I had just unhooked my books and laid the bottle to rest in the pencil groove at the top of my Formica desk, something unusual occurred. I wish I knew what it was, but memory is blank. All I remember is seeing my little brown glass flask in a perfect arc, flowing down towards the terrazzo tiled floor, all grays and greens and beige. The brown glass shattered and I gasped in horror, my hand slapping over my mouth. Immediately the liquid puddled in an amorphous blob of toxic smoking destruction.

Students shrieked and jumped from their desks, our teacher, clueless of correct protocol in such a situation, ran from the class and brought a colleague to assess the situation. They huddled in whispering consultation.

At last one of them looked at me scowling, "Call your mother to come and clean this up."

My mother showed up, none too happy to have turned into the toxic product cleanup squad. As we left the school that day, she informed me I would no longer be taking my hydrochloric acid.

For the rest of the school year, I was reminded of my stomach shame every day, the bleached and marred floor, a marked territory right next to my desk, never replaced.

Bio: Katina Pontikes writes in retirement as a form of therapy and introspection. She lives in Houston, Texas and on the shore of Lake Chapala in Mexico, where she counts herself fortunate to enjoy the adventures of an expat. She still has stomach issues, only now she takes an acid suppressing medication, never quite able to tame the stomach monster. Email: katepon@yahoo.com