Saved by a match - in bone marrow

Mr Jeth Ng, who signed up as a bone marrow donor in 2009, donated his stem cells to Ms Narita Nikitina, who had acute myelogenous leukaemia, after he turned out to be her one-in-20,000 match last year.

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By Ong Kai Xuan

Instead of going overseas with friends, Ms Narita Nikitina went to hospital after her graduation from Lasalle College of the Arts in 2013 because of a persistent cough.

What the Indonesian thought was a normal cough was more serious - she was diagnosed with acute myelogenous leukaemia, a cancer of the blood cells.

Initial treatment failed, and a bone marrow transplant was her only chance of survival. "I've heard that some people wait for a really long time, and some don't make it," the 24-year-old told The Straits Times yesterday at an event to mark World Blood Cancer Day on May 28.

But she found her one-in-20,000 match - Mr Jeth Ng, now 28 - within a month and is now on the road to recovery.

The assistant brand manager had put his name on the registry in 2009 at a blood donation drive at Singapore Management University, where representatives of the Bone Marrow Donation Programme (BMDP) were present.

"I wasn't really expecting to be a match. I just put my name on the registry to increase the database," said Mr Ng.

Five years later in 2014, he was found to be a match. But he missed the first call from BMDP and thought its e-mail to him was spam. When it called again, he did the initial tests despite some hesitation.

Like many others, he thought a bone marrow transplant would be painful but found out from the BMDP it was largely painless.

There are two methods: extraction from the pelvic bone under general anaesthesia and peripheral blood stem cell donation. Doctors decided the second method suited Mr Ng better.

Under this method, donors get injections once daily for four consecutive days before the donation, then sit for a five- to seven- hour-long process where blood is passed through a machine to collect the stem cells, before returning to the donor.

"The only discomfort is a slight soreness in the bones before the donation because of the injection that makes you produce more bone marrow. It feels like post-exercise soreness," he said.

He was back at work after a day of rest, and even went on an eight-day hiking trip in Nepal a month later.

"Many people have the idea that donating will impact their body and health for the rest of their life, but that's not true," said BMDP chief executive Jane Prior.

The registry has 50,000 volunteers, but BMDP aims for 50,000 more in the next three years to cater to the 50 monthly calls for suitable donors.

"Signing up as a bone marrow donor and committing to donate can make the biggest difference in the world for a patient," said Ms Nikitina, who broke down in tears when asked how thankful she was for the donation.

People who wish to sign up as a donor can go to www.bmdp.org to request a postal kit.

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