

Srikanth Akkineni

Age 9

My earliest memory of the pandemic is being on the bus on my way home from school when I heard another kid saying something about a virus. When I arrived home that day, my mom told me I should wash my hands for thirty seconds every time I come into the house.

Other changes happened quickly. Our school closed, and classes moved online, but only for thirty minutes a day that spring. So I didn't feel like I was learning much. One day my mom and I were headed out somewhere and she told me to wear a face mask. I asked why I had to do that, and she explained about viruses and contagion. My friend's dad said that my friend and I couldn't play together anymore because we all needed to isolate with our families.

I didn't feel ready for any of this. I was just a normal kid and then suddenly everything changed, and it seemed I couldn't do anything I wanted to do anymore. When summer vacation began, all I did was stay home. Once in a while we'd visit some family

friends or go to the supermarket. We could swim in our pool, but mostly we didn't leave the house.

Third grade began and we continued with online learning. Even though I didn't like doing school from home, some parts of that time were worthwhile. For one thing, I did research and took part in an extracurricular online science class to learn about how antibodies and vaccines work. The fact that vaccines are fake viruses that teach your body to fight off disease was really interesting to me. I also started a YouTube channel, and I wrote a book with a group of my friends.

In December of 2020, my family flew to Arizona to visit our grandparents. The plane ride was uncomfortable because my mom insisted I wear a gown, a mask and a face shield. We sanitized our plates and everything we touched. It was all very unpleasant. While we were in Arizona, we saw lots of people not wearing masks, so we tried to avoid them. My grandfather wasn't leaving their house at all; my grandmother had to go to work, because she's a teacher, but she was double-masking. I could see that it was hard for everyone, not just kids like me.

When it was time for fourth grade and my mom told me that school was reopening, I was really happy. I knew I hadn't learned nearly as much during online classes as I normally did in the classroom, and I was excited to start learning again. It was great to see so many other kids, and I especially enjoyed sitting down in the cafeteria and eating a school lunch with all my friends. We still have to wear masks at recess, and it's hard to play basketball and football with a mask on, but it's worth it to be back together. My mom bought some different materials to try to make masks that were more comfortable for me than the cloth ones.

We have a lot of family in India, where the contagion rate is especially bad, and two of my uncles have died. When we can finally travel to India again, I'll be interested to hear from my relatives more about what this time has been like for them. But one thing I've learned is to try hard to think positive. When the pandemic began, I was terrified that my parents or I would get the virus. That made me feel scared and tense all the time, so I made myself think positive, remembering all the precautions that we've been taking to avoid it and knowing that we will continue taking those precautions for as long as we need to. Even when I can get vaccinated, I'll still be really careful, because one thing I learned when I was researching vaccinations was that being vaccinated doesn't mean it's one hundred percent certain you won't get sick; it just means that your body is better trained to fight it off.

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