

## Freedom from pain

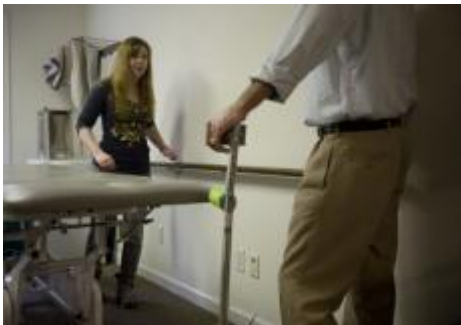
**A 24-year-old Christiansburg woman is regaining mobility and making plans to attend graduate school after treatment put her in remission from years of pain.**



Brandy Sachs spent seven days in a ketamine-induced coma and went through months of ketamine boosters to ease chronic pain. Her physical progression has been slow, but she is strengthening her legs by riding a stationary bike and walking on a treadmill.



James O'Connell applies resistance to Brandy Sachs' foot during a physical therapy session as her mother, Lisa Sachs, looks on.



Brandy Sachs, 24, takes unassisted steps Monday for the first time in years during a physical therapy session with James O'Connell in Blacksburg.

Justin Cook | The Roanoke Times

By Anna L. Mallory | The Roanoke Times

CHRISTIANSBURG -- Brandy Sachs smiles more these days, even after gaining 30 pounds in one year.

For this 24-year-old, weight gain is a blessing and the least of her concerns.

In October 2008, Sachs weighed 76 pounds after she spent seven days in a ketamine-induced coma. She was the 55th patient to undergo the treatment in Germany. She emerged from the procedure with few memories and couldn't perform natural tasks, such as shivering.

The coma was designed to reboot her nervous system, and, doctors hoped, rid her of the decade-long bouts of pain associated with reflex sympathetic dystrophy, known now as chronic regional pain syndrome. The little-known condition she was diagnosed with at age 13 caused her to cringe in pain with any touch even as slight as a flutter of her brown hair. Walking was difficult, and her right foot had turned inward and would often swell.

Today, after a year's worth of ketamine boosters, doctors say Sachs is in remission. She's been RSD-pain free for a year and won't have to return to Philadelphia for infusions of the drug for another year, unless any changes occur.

While she isn't entirely pain, or medicine, free (she is on strong painkillers as a result of a back surgery that touched nerves, but that pain is not related to the condition), Sachs said a little pain is better than her previous state.

Always cautious, she prefers to say the condition is dormant, but she's pleased with her progress.

"I have RSD, and I'm always going to have it," she said.

She walks on two crutches and has become more active. She started driving on her own, went rock-wall climbing and can make two full laps around Walmart.

Mentally, Sachs said she still feels stuck at 16. Many of her memories -- and skills -- are fuzzy. Doctors said some memories may never return.

The physical progression also has been slow, although Blacksburg therapist James O'Connell said Sachs has made great strides. She's now working on the stationary bike and the treadmill to gain strength and tone her unused legs. He's trying to get her to wear regular shoes, instead of the orthopedic shoe created for her in Germany.

Sachs goes to physical therapy twice weekly. Just last week, she took her first steps in years without bracing herself.

"I'm so proud of her," said her mother, Lisa Sachs. For years, the mother and daughter could barely hug. "It still makes you smile every time you see her stand up," she said.

Around the house, Brandy Sachs still often uses a wheelchair. That's mostly to navigate the crowds of cats, dogs and people who swarm her parents' small Christiansburg home.

"It's just easier," she said. If she bangs any part of her body too much, the RSD could flare, and the pain might return.

In August, Sachs hopes to enroll in graduate school at Virginia Tech to study sociology.

Her parents said that step will be good for their daughter, whose life was overtaken by the condition.

Sachs' story has inspired many. In July, People magazine featured part of her story.

The family said the breadth of knowledge about RSD and CRPS is growing.

"When we first started with it, they knew nothing," Lisa Sachs said.