

Champion of the waves

Nitin Mongia, a 34-year-old resident of Mumbai, India, looks like exactly what he is: an active, healthy outdoorsman, with broad shoulders and strong arms from many hours spent on the water as a world-class competitive sailor.



It's hard to believe he is also a cancer patient, living with a rare disease that once was almost always fatal.

Nitin was diagnosed in July 2005 with CML (chronic myeloid leukemia), a form of bone marrow cancer. Three months later, he began treatment with Glivec, an advanced cancer medication produced by Novartis. The medication was provided by Novartis at no charge through the Max Foundation, which operates the Novartis GIPAP (Global Patient Assistance Program) in India and many other countries.

Today, Nitin is symptom-free, and the biggest challenge of his daily life is preparing for what he hopes will be a trip to the Olympic Games in China next year as a member of India's sailing team. In 2003, in what the International Sailing Federation described as "a historic day for sailing in India," Nitin won the International OK Dinghy World Championship.

When he was diagnosed with CML, Nitin recalls, his first thought was "that it couldn't be me. I didn't feel different physically. It came as a total shock."

After his doctor prescribed Glivec, Nitin's next concern was the cost. He works in the food catering industry, but his family income – like those of most India residents – is not nearly sufficient to pay the cost of advanced medications. "My biggest fear was how to afford Glivec," he said. "I was amazed to learn that I could obtain the drug free through the Novartis GIPAP program.

Nitin, who is married and has a 4-year-old daughter, says the only side effect from Glivec was some initial weight gain. "I'm leading my life absolutely," he says. "My daily life hasn't changed."

Since beginning treatment, Nitin also has attended patient workshops organized by the Max Foundation and has volunteered for "Adopt a Friend of Max." Volunteers in this program provide financial and emotional assistance for needy patients.

"The Max Foundation isn't just about distributing medication," Nitin says. "It's also about caring for one another. We get a lot of support through Max."

As for Novartis, "they have done an amazing amount of good work, performed a great deal of research and spent a lot of money to develop Glivec," Nitin says. "And the GIPAP program is just remarkable. There are almost 7,000 patients today in India who are receiving one of the world's most advanced medications, absolutely free – and a lot of people don't know that."