

Athena's Adventures in Health Policy

# HELP PREVENT CANCER



By Ana Rita Gonzalez and Kelly Maddox

Illustrated by Melina Sugliano

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Goodbye, Fifth Grade	5
Chapter 2: Summer of Prevention	10
Chapter 3: Sunny Days	17
Chapter 4: No Smoking	27
Chapter 5: 100 Crunches	35
Chapter 6: Pizza and Pretzels	41
Chapter 7: A Visit with Dr. Diego	46
Chapter 8: Hello, Sixth Grade	52

CHAPTER 1:  
GOODBYE, FIFTH GRADE



**A**thena’s pencil hovered over her paper. She was supposed to be writing this down—her final essay of the year. “How does it feel to be graduating from elementary school?” All around her, the sounds of her classmates scribbling away made her feel rushed. She didn’t know how to explain that she was excited for fifth grade to be over without sounding harsh.

Certain memories from this year were permanently etched into her brain. The look on Conroy’s face when he told her he had type 2 diabetes, the sadness and fear that welled in her chest when she found out her grandma had cancer...

*It’s hard to watch the people I love suffer,* Athena thought. It was probably the hardest thing she’d ever done.

On some mornings, Athena woke up feeling as if she hadn’t slept at all, which was both frustrating and exhausting. She did her best to focus on her homework, but by dinnertime, her energy was spent. All she wanted to do was eat, watch something funny on TV, and go to bed.

Both Conroy and her grandma had made massive lifestyle changes considering their diagnoses. Athena knew that for all the grief she had experienced, theirs cut even deeper. But she felt, as she put her pencil down, that she had changed, too.

The bell would ring in an hour, marking the beginning of summer. Maybe some time at the beach, summer camp, and with friends would help her feel more like herself. She certainly hoped so.

At the last second, Athena picked up her pencil again and wrote, *Goodbye, fifth grade.*



When Athena stepped off her bike that afternoon, she felt that a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders. The sun felt wonderful on her face, and she noticed, as if for the first time, how green the grass was outside her home. Summer had officially arrived, and all that was left to do was celebrate.

“What are you looking at?” Hui asked, following Athena’s gaze.

“Nothing,” she replied. It was difficult to explain the emotional turmoil she’d been feeling all day. She turned to her three best friends—Hui, Conroy, and Zosia—and said, “Come on. I bet my mom made us a snack.”

Athena swung open the front door as shouts of “SURPRISE!” rippled through the house. Streamers of every color hung from the ceiling, and confetti decorated the kitchen table, which was piled with food. From

behind furniture and walls and balloons appeared dozens of friendly faces—Athena’s family, her friends’ families, and even Athena’s grandparents. Everyone was smiling at the graduates, who still stood in the doorway, gaping.

“What is all this?” Zosia cried.

“A party, of course!” Athena’s little sister Rae was sitting on the back of the couch in a unicorn print dress, kicking her legs impatiently. “Can we cut the cake now?”

Athena’s mom laughed. “Come on in, kids. Let’s eat!”

Zosia, Hui, and Conroy made a beeline for the table, but Athena ran to her mom first. “Did you plan this?” she asked her.

“We all planned it, babe—all the parents.” She hugged Athena and whispered, “Congratulations. You’re finished with elementary school!”





Athena wasn't sure why, but that statement brought tears to her eyes. She felt happy and sad and excited at the same time. Everything was changing—had already changed—and would probably continue to change for a long, long while. Was this what it felt like to grow up?

Pulling away, Athena's mom asked, "Did you see that Grandma is here?"

"Yes," Athena replied. Her heart squeezed like it might burst. She loved her grandma so much—it wasn't fair that she was sick. It would be easier to celebrate this milestone if all her loved ones were invincible and destined to live forever.

As if reading her mind, her mom whispered, "Don't worry about things you can't fix, Athena. Go give her a hug and enjoy your time together."

Athena brushed the tears from her cheeks with a flourish. She didn't want her friends—or her grandmother—to see her cry. "Okay. Thanks, Mama."

Her grandma was seated in the living room, watching the festivities. She smiled as Athena neared and said, "Well, aren't you looking snazzy!"

Grandma loved discussing clothes with the girls. Often, when Athena and Rae visited, she would pull out her old photo albums, which proved that she was once very fashionable. For her last birthday, she had given Athena the dress that she was currently wearing—blue with pink flowers. It was Athena's favorite.

She twirled. "Thank you, Grandma. How are you doing today?"

"Just fine, sweetie," she said in a cheerful tone. "How does it feel to be a middle schooler?"

"Oh, gosh." Athena laughed. "I'm not a middle schooler yet. I'm not ready."



Her grandmother waved her hand dismissively. “Of course you are. You’re plenty smart and kind to a fault. And aren’t you planning to try out for the swim team?”

Athena nodded.

“See? You’re perfectly ready.” Her grandma opened her arms. “Now, are you going to give me a hug or not?”

Smiling, Athena leaned down and gave her a hug. Her grandmother felt small and frail—but Athena couldn’t fix those things. And she didn’t need to. Grandma was here, with her, radiating love and pride in her granddaughter’s accomplishments, and right now, that was more than enough.

“I love you, Grandma,” she whispered. “I’m so thankful you’re here.”

“I love you, too, Athena, and I will always be with you. You know that, don’t you?”

Athena smiled through her tears because she did know.

# CHAPTER 2: SUMMER OF PREVENTION



The sun was bright outside Athena's bedroom window. It had been a while since she slept in, but it was summertime now—the season to relax.

Not that she felt particularly peaceful. As she rubbed her eyes and stretched, her thoughts drifted to yesterday's party and her conversation with her grandma. *I will always be with you.* If only Athena could look into the future and see that everything would be all right!

She pulled her blanket over her head and sighed. Lately, a new fear had been festering in her mind, and it was especially loud this morning. *What if I get sick, too?*

Based on her health history and lifestyle, it seemed ridiculous—but then she thought of Conroy. He thought he was healthy, too, and now, he had to watch his blood sugar levels closer than a magnifying glass.

There had to be *something* she could do to lay her fears to rest. She would have her annual checkup at the end of the summer, but until then, she wanted to do everything she could to protect her health. Once middle school started, she would be busier than ever. She had to ensure she was covering all her bases before her days were filled with homework and swimming practice.

*Sickness doesn't happen overnight, Athena reminded herself. I can get ahead of it.*

And she knew exactly where to begin.



“Don’t have cereal for breakfast.” Odin was on his hands and knees on the kitchen floor, wiping up a puddle of milk with a wad of paper towels. The milk bottle sat empty on the counter. “Sorry, Athena.”

She laughed. “That’s okay. I was going to make eggs anyway.”

“Feeling fancy this morning?”

Again, she laughed. *Fancy* wasn’t exactly the right word. “I just need some protein. I didn’t eat much at the party.”

“Well, Hui wiped us out, as usual.” Odin peeled himself off the floor to throw away the paper towels. He was always joking that Hui was part of the family because when she came over, she headed straight for the fridge.

Athena observed the leftover trays of party food on the counter and shook her head. “I think we have plenty.”

“Good morning, everyone,” said their dad as he strode into the kitchen. “Have you seen your mother?”

“I’m right here!” she called from the dining room.

*Perfect*, Athena thought. Both of her parents were home and available. Now was the time to ask them about improving her health. “Would you like some eggs, Papa?”

“I would love some. Thank you, Athena.”

She nodded and set to work. When the eggs were almost ready, she made toast and grabbed a few handfuls of fruit from one of the trays of leftovers. Then, she brought everything into the dining room, where both of her parents were now seated.

“What are you reading, Mama?” Athena asked, setting a plate down in front of her dad. Her mom was busily reviewing something on her tablet, a cup of coffee growing cold in her hand.

“Just headlines,” she replied. After a few moments, during which Athena started eating, her mom looked up and said, “How are you this morning?”

“I’m fine,” said Athena. Her heart was racing, though she wasn’t sure why. She asked her parents questions about health policy all the time. Why did it feel different to ask about her individual health? After a few moments, she said, “I have a question for both of you.”

“Okay.” Her mom put down her tablet as her dad lowered his fork. “Fire away.”

Athena took a deep breath. Slowly, she said, “I want to improve my

health before middle school starts. I don't feel sick, exactly, but I want to feel even better."

With a knowing smile, her mom placed her hand over Athena's. "I think that's a wonderful goal. Prevention is one of the most important tools we have when it comes to our health."

"Prevention?" Athena frowned. "What's that?" She just wanted to know how to escape cancer!

"Prevention is taking steps to avoid something bad that could happen," her dad replied. "For example, when you wear safety gear while riding your bike, you're preventing injuries."

Athena smiled guiltily at her breakfast. She'd learned injury prevention the hard way last year—by removing her wrist wraps, falling off her bike, and breaking her wrist. Not exactly a high point in her elementary school experience. "So, there are all sorts of prevention policies?" she clarified.

"Absolutely," said her mom. "There are prevention policies for tobacco



use, vaccinations, sun exposure, and many others.” She paused for a moment, then added, “Honey, I know it’s scary to see your grandma so sick, but your health journey *can* be different.”

“But what about genetics?” Athena burst. “I don’t really understand them, but I know they’re important.”

Her dad swallowed a bite of his breakfast and smiled at her. Even so, he looked a bit sad; Athena’s grandmother was his mom. “Genetics is the study of genes and how they’re passed down from generation to generation,” he said. “Our genes do affect our health, but our lifestyle choices have a major impact as well, and that’s the part we can control.”

Athena sighed. There seemed to be a lot of things she could *not* control. Finally, she said, “What kinds of lifestyle choices can I make to stay healthy?”

“Well, for starters, you can choose to stay physically active and continue eating a balanced diet,” said her mom. “As you grow up, you can choose to avoid tobacco, get vaccinated, and practice sun safety.”

“And there are health policies for all of these things?”

“That’s right. Health policy tells us why these things are important so we can practice them throughout life. Remember, policies are rules made by the government to protect us from harm.”

Athena had learned in school that the government creates policies, including laws, guidelines, and regulations that ensure everyone is treated fairly by those policies. She also knew that, just like her parents took care of their home and family, the government takes care of roads, parks, public health, and sanitation. It made sense that government leaders



would create health policies for physical activity, sun safety, and everything in between. And yet...

“That’s a lot of policies,” she said, poking at her eggs with her fork. “How am I going to improve my health if I can’t even pick a place to start?”

“Just take it one thing at a time,” her dad suggested. “You’re very healthy, Athena; there’s no rush.”

She nodded—that was true. “Mama, could I have an hour of screen time per day this summer? I’d like to research these policies so I can understand them better.”

“Of course,” said Mama. She pushed her tablet toward Athena as everyone got up from the table. “Just don’t look up any specific symptoms. You know health-related questions are best left for Dr. Diego to answer.”

Athena nodded. She could tell this was going to be a very informative summer.

CHAPTER 3:  
SUNNY DAYS



**A** few weeks passed as Athena settled into her summer routine. Every morning, she drank a full glass of water, ate a balanced meal, and practiced her swimming exercises so she would be ready for tryouts in the fall. In the afternoon, she spent time outside with Odin and Rae or met up with friends to build puzzles and play board games. By dinnertime, she was ready to wind down and liked to spend the hour before bed researching health policies. Tonight, in preparation for her family's beach vacation, she was reading about sun exposure.

"Knock, knock." Her mom poked her head into Athena's dimly lit room. "Time to sleep, sweetheart. We'll have to get an early start tomorrow if we want to make it to the beach by sunset."

Athena turned off the tablet and set it on her nightstand. "Okay. Goodnight, Mama."



Her mom smiled. “Did you learn anything interesting today?”

She nodded eagerly. “I was just reading about sun exposure and how we can protect ourselves.”

“That’s great,” her mom commended her. “Did you pack your sunscreen?”

“It’s in my beach bag,” Athena said, pointing to the blue polka dot canvas near the door. “I checked, and it’s SPF 30, which is what dermatologists recommend for kids.”

Her mom nodded. “I’ll make sure Odin has his, too, and pack some for Rae. Could you remind me to grab the snacks out of the fridge in the morning?”

“Definitely.” Athena had watched her mom pack fruits, vegetables, cheese, and crackers into glass storage containers earlier that day. She knew from her research that unlike plastic, glass was free of a chemical called *bisphenol A* that increases the risk of cancer.

Her mom kissed her on the forehead, snapping her out of her thoughts. “Thanks, babe. Sleep well.”

“You, too,” Athena whispered. She waited for her mom to turn out the lights, then sighed happily. It struck her that in less than twenty-four hours, she would be at the beach. She couldn’t wait to spend time by the ocean. Surely, a couple of weeks in the water would lift her spirits and make her feel young again.



The next morning, Athena and her siblings were up before the sun. They put their bags in the back of the car, then helped their mom carry the snacks. Odin filled everybody’s water bottles, and by the time they were all buckled into their seats, their dad had started their road trip playlist.

Athena adjusted her neck pillow, singing along to one of her favorite songs. Rae was already falling back to sleep with her head on Odin’s shoulder. Though she was still tired, too, Athena was determined to watch the sunrise outside her window. It was one of the best parts of driving anywhere early in the morning.

Sure enough, half an hour later, the sky began to lighten into brilliant shades of purple and orange. Athena smiled at the sight. Then, as the sun rose over the distant hills, she closed her eyes and went back to sleep.

Athena considered herself to be a “professional car napper.” She could nap through entire road trips, waking only for quick snacks and stretching

her legs. This made the time pass quickly, so before she knew it, her dad had rolled down all the windows—a sure sign that they had arrived.

She rubbed her eyes and listened as the car came to a stop. Yes, that was the sound of waves crashing! Odin’s door flew open, and Rae scurried after him. Athena tossed her neck pillow to the side and followed.

The sun was already beginning to set, and the beach was quiet. Athena and her siblings took off their shoes and ran, giggling, through the sand, toward the sea. The water was pleasantly cool on their feet, and by the time darkness settled, the bottom half of Rae’s dress was soaked.

“Let’s get to the house,” their mom said, ushering them back to the car. “I’m not ready!” Rae complained.

Their mom laughed. “We’ll come back tomorrow morning—I promise.”



Athena was happy to return to the little blue house that she and her family rented every summer. She carried her bags up to the room she shared with Rae and gazed fondly at the floral wallpaper and white bedspread. Many things had changed since this time last year, but this house was the same, and Athena was glad.

She brushed her teeth, put on her pajamas, and crawled into bed with Rae, who was already asleep. With a quick kiss on their foreheads, their mom opened the windows, whispered, “Goodnight, my girls,” and disappeared into the hall.

Athena fell asleep to the sound of crashing waves, not a worry on her mind.



Bright and early the next morning, Rae shook Athena awake, hissing, “You can sleep when you’re old, Thea. Let’s go to the beach!”

They pulled on their swimsuits, ate a quick breakfast of cereal and fruit, and hurried back to the shore, their parents and Odin close behind them.

The beach was more crowded than it had been when they first arrived, and Athena could feel the reason why—it was blisteringly hot and sunny. She was already sweating, and she’d only been outside for a few minutes. Luckily, she’d remembered to bring her beach bag, which contained a towel, a sunhat, sunglasses, and, most importantly, her sunscreen.

Athena, her parents, and her siblings found a comfortable spot on the sand and spread out their towels. “Mama,” Athena said, “could you help me put this on?” She held out her sunscreen bottle in question.

“Of course,” her mom replied. Carefully, she helped Athena apply sunscreen to her face, ears, shoulders, arms, and legs. Then, she turned to Odin, who stood still just long enough to receive a layer of protection before jumping into the ocean.

“Come here, Rae!” her mom called. “You need sunscreen, too.”

Rae was already splashing in the waves and was disappointed by this interruption. She quickly dried off and tried to stand still as Mama applied sunscreen to her face and ears. “How much longer?” she whined.

“Let me get your back, please,” her mom replied.

Rae squirmed. “Papa is going to jump over the waves without me!” she cried.

Athena watched as their mom did her best to hold Rae still and apply sunscreen to her legs at the same time. At last, Mama said, “All right, you can go now.”

*I don't think she got enough protection,* Athena thought, but she didn't dare say anything. It was challenging to convince Rae to do things that she didn't want to do, and now that she was in the water with Papa, she looked happy.

“Are you all right, Athena?” Her mom was looking at her from behind a pair of dark sunglasses.

“I'm fine,” she said, smiling. She quickly put on her sunhat. “I'm going to build a sandcastle. Maybe Odin will help me dig a moat around it.”





Athena, Odin, and Rae spent the rest of the day building a sandcastle kingdom, swimming, and jumping over waves with their dad. Every couple of hours, they applied more sunscreen, Rae squirming and complaining from start to finish. Athena frequently observed her sister's skin to see if she was burning, but Rae seemed fine. And by early evening, Athena forgot all about sun safety and simply relaxed on the sand. She felt so at peace, watching the sun set in shades of pink and orange. The stress of fifth grade melted away, leaving her lighter and happier.

This was the life.



Athena woke to the sound of Rae whining.

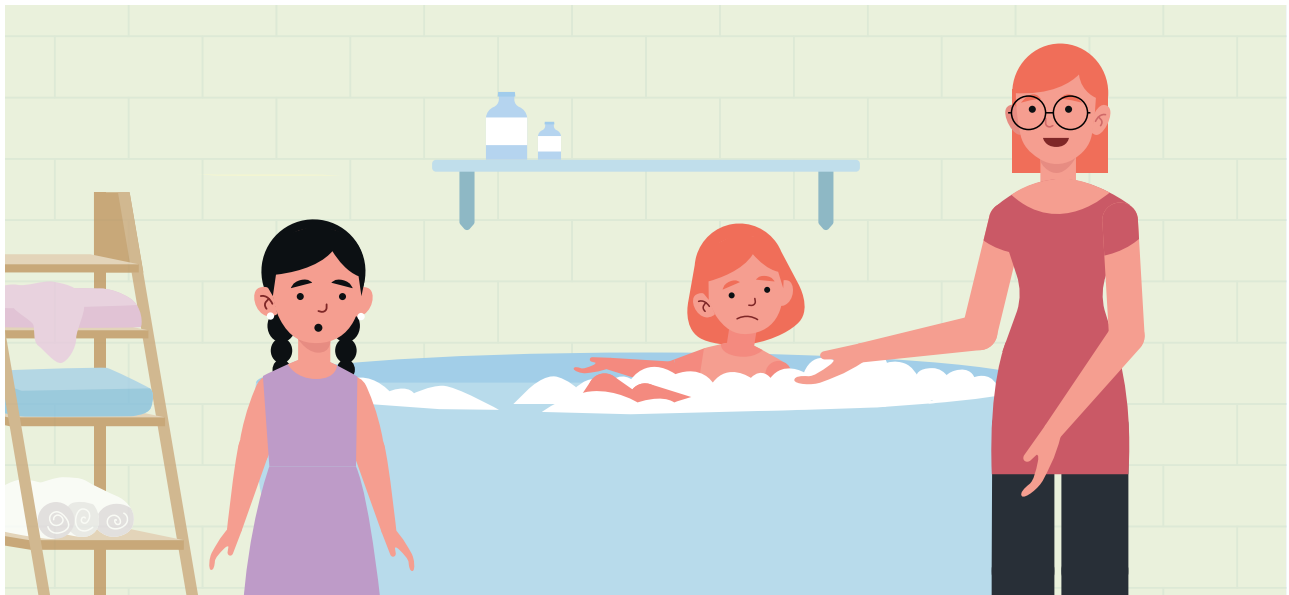
“Ow, ow, ow...”

Rolling over, Athena found her sister lying on her back with her arms and legs in the air, like a very unhappy bug. She was sunburned from the tip of her nose to the tops of her feet. Closing her eyes, Rae said, “Everything hurts, Thea.”

Athena pushed herself into a seated position to get a better look at Rae’s skin. It was pink and, Athena noted, warm to the touch. “Does it really hurt, Rae? Or is it just uncomfortable?” She tried to keep her tone even, but she was frustrated that Rae had put herself at risk by being too squirmy for sunscreen.

Rae considered. Finally, she said, “I don’t know. I just want it to stop.”

Athena sighed. “Come on. We’ll go show Mama.”



Much to the relief of both girls, their mom wasn't worried. She simply filled the bathtub with cool water and told Rae to sit in it for twenty minutes. Then, she applied aloe gel to her shoulders, arms, and legs. "Better?" her mom asked.

"Yes," Rae said glumly. She'd already been told that she had to stay in the shade for the next few days. This would put a damper on her wave-jumping plans—but at least she would be safe.

"Don't forget your water bottle today," Mama reminded her. "It's important to stay hydrated when you're recovering from a sunburn."

Rae might have been annoyed by these protective measures, but to Athena, they were magical. It was comforting to know that when prevention failed, treatment could provide relief. Rae's skin would heal, and she would be back in the ocean in just a few days—this time, with plenty of sunscreen.

# CHAPTER 4: NO SMOKING



**F**or the remainder of the week, Athena did nothing but lounge on the sand, eat fruit popsicles, and fall asleep to the sound of waves crashing in the distance. Applying sunscreen became a normal part of her daily routine; she didn't even think about it anymore. She was building up a tan, and sometimes, when she looked in the mirror, she thought she looked healthy. The sunshine boosted her mood, and by the second week of vacation, she was more relaxed than she'd been all year.

That was, until disaster struck.

It was a beautiful day on the beach, warm with a cool breeze. Athena was sitting on a towel, painting Rae's toenails a sparkly shade of pink. Her sister's sunburn had healed and left her with a rosy glow. She didn't tan like Athena and Odin but had gotten better at wearing her sunhat. Athena was quite proud of her.

“Where’s your brother?” their dad asked as he splashed out of the ocean.

Athena shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe he went back to the house with Mama. She was going to get her book.”

Rae shook her head and pointed farther down the beach. “He went that way, to his friend’s house.” She blew on her toenails to make them dry faster.

“I can go find him,” Athena offered. “I’m ready for lunch. How about you, Rae?”

She nodded, still blowing on her nails.

“Rae and I will take your bag to the house,” Papa told Athena. “Be quick, and we’ll make sandwiches when you and Odin get back.”

Athena nodded, brushed the sand off her legs, and ran toward Odin’s friend’s house. Odin had met a few boys his age sometime last week and had been spending his mornings with them. They said they were hunting for sand crabs, but Athena never saw them on the shore, which she found strange.

She skidded to a stop on Odin’s friend’s front porch and knocked on the door. A few seconds later, when no one had answered, she rang the bell. Still nothing.

Athena walked quickly down the sloping driveway and into the backyard. She meant to find the back door, but she found Odin first.

He was sitting with his back to her, laughing. Athena smiled, glad he was having a nice time—until a puff of smoke rose into the air above his head.



Unsure what to make of this, she ducked behind a rosebush and squinted at the boys. What were they doing—setting something on fire? She watched Odin hand an object to the boy next to him and wondered...

“Odin!” She ran from behind the rosebush and into the circle of boys. There were four of them, including her brother, and although they were older than her, they suddenly looked small. “Please tell me you’re not smoking.”

Unable to deny it, Odin stared at his shoes.

“I think we’d better get back to the house,” Athena said quietly. “Papa and Rae are making lunch.” She glared at the other three boys. “Isn’t there something else you could be doing?”

The boy with the cigarette quickly stubbed it out. “See you later, Odin,” he said, and then he hurried inside with the other two boys.

“You didn’t have to embarrass me, Athena,” Odin said, rolling his eyes. “They’re going to hate me now.”

Athena couldn’t decide if she was angry or scared or both. “You have to quit, Odin. You know our grandparents smoked, and now Grandma has cancer.”

For a moment, Odin looked sad, maybe even apologetic. Then, he brushed her off, saying, “I’m too young to get cancer. Relax.”

Now, Athena was *sure* she was angry. “Don’t talk to me like that. I’m trying to help you.”

“Everyone else is doing it, and they’re fine,” Odin said. “Plus, I didn’t start until I met these guys. It’s not like I’m an addict or anything.”

“That’s great to hear,” Athena said, her blood boiling. “Want to know what else is great? The health policies that stop minors from buying cigarettes in the first place. You’re not supposed to have access to them, Odin. Where did they come from?”

“Who knows? I didn’t buy them!”

Athena sighed. “Have your friends been smoking all along?”

Odin shrugged. “Maybe.”

“Even secondhand smoke is dangerous,” Athena said. She was trying to calm down, but the thought of Odin inhaling cigarette smoke for days on end was distressing. “I don’t think you should hang out with them anymore.”

“I didn’t ask you,” Odin replied, but he didn’t sound angry; he sounded sorry.

Athena turned on her heel and began walking back to their vacation



house. After a few minutes, she heard Odin run up behind her and say, “Please don’t tell Mama and Papa about this, Thea. I’ll be miserable for the rest of our trip if you do.”

They walked in silence until they reached the house. At the foot of the driveway, Athena turned to Odin and said, “I won’t have to tell them. You smell like cigarette smoke.”

When they got inside, Athena found Rae sitting at the kitchen table, eating her sandwich. “What took you so long?” she asked with her mouth full.

“Come on, Rae. You and I are going for a bike ride,” said Athena.

Rae shrugged. “Okay.”

The girls quickly put on their safety gear and left the house. Odin was still sulking in the doorway, preparing himself to face their parents. Athena knew they would be concerned about him—but she also knew they would listen to him and offer their support if he needed it.



As Athena watched Rae pedal down the street, she considered the fact that she seemed to care more about Odin's health than he did. Why was that, she wondered? It had been the same with Rae and the sunscreen. Not everyone was as conscious about their health (or the health of others) as Athena—and maybe that would always be true. She wasn't sure.

"Come on, Thea!" Rae called, and Athena hurried to catch up.



Later, when the girls got home, they found their mom loading clothes into the washing machine. Most of them were Odin's, Athena noticed. She was going to ask how Mama planned to get the cigarette smell out of the fabric, but Mama spoke first. "Did you have a nice time?" she asked.

"Yes," Rae answered. "I rode right through a bunch of seagulls, and they all flew away."

Mama laughed. "I'm glad you had fun." She returned her attention to the laundry, scooping detergent and baking soda into the washing machine.

Athena knew that her parents always used non-toxic laundry detergent that was free of cancer-causing chemicals, and she knew that baking soda was used to absorb odors. Odin's clothes would be as good as new in no time.

But what about his lungs?



“Are you all right, Athena?” her mom asked.

“Fine,” she replied. “Just tired.”

Mama hugged her tightly. “Maybe you could use a quick afternoon nap.”

An afternoon nap *did* sound nice, but Athena was still concerned about Odin. As if sensing her worry, Mama added, “He’s fine, babe. He won’t do it again.”

Athena nodded. That was all she needed to know.

CHAPTER 5:  
100 CRUNCHES



Once she returned from the beach, Athena's summer began passing in a blur. She could hardly believe it was already time to go to camp. She'd been attending the same program every year since she was eight years old, and every year, she loved it more.

Athena adored her school friends, but she only got to see her camp friends once a year, and that made their time together extra special. Plus, there were arts, crafts, and physical activities for everyone to try. Besides swimming, Athena didn't usually look forward to working out, but this summer, she couldn't wait. According to her research, an hour of physical activity per day was an excellent habit to prevent many diseases. If working out would help keep cancer away, she was willing to try it.

“All packed?” her dad asked her at dinner.

“Mostly,” Athena replied. “Mama is washing some things for me, and I still need to get my stuff out of the shower.” Since her grandma’s diagnosis, Athena had started using non-toxic shampoo and conditioner with no harmful fragrances. She knew there would be extra supplies at camp, but she didn’t know how healthy or eco-friendly they were, so she was determined to bring her own.

“Don’t forget to pack your smile,” Papa said, and Athena laughed.



When she arrived at camp, a cheer rose from Cabin 4. Athena shielded her eyes from the sun and squinted up the forested hill. There, on the front porch of the cabin, stood three of her friends. She jumped up and down and waved back at them, then hurried into the main cabin to check in.

“You’re in Cabin 4, my dear,” one of the camp counselors told her. “But I’m sure you already knew that.”

Athena smiled, stuck her name tag to her shirt, and ran all the way up the hill. Her friends immediately swept her into a group hug that lasted until Sonji said, “Okay, girls, I’m happy to see you, but I’ll be even happier in the cafeteria.”

Everyone laughed as they made their way back to the main cabin. It was good to be together again.



For the next few weeks, Athena dedicated herself to obstacle courses, volleyball games, and her reigning favorite, swimming. Her friends seemed confused by her sudden obsession with exercise, but she didn't want to talk about it. If she brought up her research, she would have to mention her grandma's illness, and as long as she was at camp, Athena just wanted to be happy.

"I'm going to try rock climbing today," she told Sonji. "Do you want to come?"

Sonji cringed. "Heights aren't really my thing. But I'll go line dancing with you this evening if you want."



Now, it was Athena's turn to make a face. "You know I'm a terrible dancer."

"You are not," Sonji said, smiling. "Come on. It'll be something different."

And it *was* different. Athena and Sonji stayed in the main cabin until lights out, dancing to country music and laughing when they messed up. It was kind of nice, Athena thought, to do something just because it was fun.

"I told you!" Sonji yelled over the music.

When they got back to Cabin 4, their friends were already sleeping. Sonji pulled Athena back onto the front porch and whispered, "Okay, Thea. Time to come clean. You've hardly done anything besides exercise since you got here. Why?"

Athena couldn't meet Sonji's eyes—but she couldn't lie to her either. "It's a health policy. An hour of physical activity per day is recommended for children."

Sonji nodded. "I learned about that in school. It's good preventive care. But you're getting way more than an hour of exercise, so... what are you trying to prevent?"

Athena sighed. "Cancer. My grandma was diagnosed with it last winter."

"Oh, Thea," Sonji said softly. "I'm so sorry." She gave Athena a hug, then said, "What can I do?"

"Can you keep this to yourself?" Athena whispered. "I don't really like to talk about it. And can you make me go to the art class with you tomorrow morning? I don't think rock climbing is for me."

Sonji smiled. "Of course."





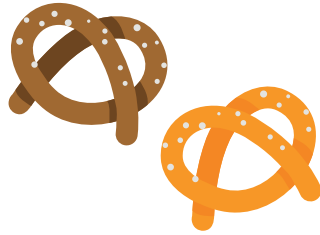
Athena’s time at camp was more enjoyable after that. She got plenty of exercise—and even trained to be able to do one hundred crunches—but she also participated in art classes and continued going to line dancing nights. To her surprise, this balance of activity made her feel much better than constantly working out. She learned that rest was important, too.

On the last day of camp, Athena asked one of her counselors to take a photo of her group, standing on the front porch of Cabin 4. Everyone expected to be back next summer, but until then, they all wanted something to commemorate their time together.

They dreaded saying goodbye, but when the moment came, Sonji hugged Athena and said, “I hope sixth grade is perfect for you. You deserve it, Thea.”

“You too, Sonji. I’ll see you next summer.”

CHAPTER 6:  
PIZZA AND PRETZELS



**A**thena could hardly believe that summer was almost over. She felt happier and more knowledgeable than she did at the beginning of the season, and she wasn't quite ready for it to end. Even so, she couldn't help being excited for sixth grade. Athena always loved the start of a new school year.

"I think you're going to need a bigger backpack," her mom said, making a note on her phone. She and Athena were preparing to go back-to-school shopping with Hui, Zosia, and their moms. Athena loved this part of the summer, too.

"You're probably right," she replied. "Remember Odin's sixth grade history book? It was huge."

"Lugging that thing around was harder than working out," Odin recalled, and Athena laughed.

"Well, we'd better get going," their mom said, ushering Athena into the car. "We're meeting the girls in fifteen minutes."

At the mall, Athena hugged her friends as if she hadn't seen them in years, even though it had only been a few days.

"You two have to help me find a new pair of gym shoes," Hui said. "If we do anything besides walk around the field on our first day of school, I'm going to face plant."

"I need about a hundred pairs of socks," Zosia joked. "I can never find socks when it's time to leave."

Athena smiled. This was going to be fun. "The first thing I need is a bigger backpack. After that, we'll see."

For hours, the girls wandered around the mall, trying on clothes, shoes, and backpacks, and holding fashion shows in the dressing rooms. Their moms walked behind them, talking about—whatever moms talked about for fun. When it was time to check out, they helped the girls pay for their items, then returned to their conversation.

Once Athena, Hui, and Zosia had everything they needed for the start of school—including gym shoes, socks, and matching backpacks—they sat down in the food court to catch their breath.

"That was exhausting," said Zosia, slouching in her chair.

"I never want to try on another shoe," Hui agreed.

Athena looked around the food court; she was suddenly famished.

"Who needs a snack?"

"Me!" Zosia and Hui said at the same time.

"I want pizza," Zosia added. "It smells so good."

Hui looked to the opposite end of the food court. "I've been thinking about a giant pretzel since we got here. That's what I want."



“Hold on,” Athena said, confused. “Remember Conroy’s diagnosis? I learned some important things about it this summer.”

And she had. In addition to researching cancer prevention, Athena also investigated type 2 diabetes and the steps she could take to avoid it. She thought Hui and Zosia might have done the same—but apparently not.

“You learned about diabetes? I bet that will make Conroy happy,” said Zosia.

“What did you find out?” asked Hui.

“Well,” Athena began, “there are certain lifestyle choices that can help prevent type 2 diabetes. One of them is eating healthy foods.”

The girls nodded, considering. After a moment, Hui said, “What are you going to eat, Thea?”

Athena pointed over Hui’s shoulder. “I was thinking of getting a fruit

smoothie. They have healthy fiber and vitamin C.”

Zosia smiled. “I could go for a strawberry banana smoothie.”

“Sounds good to me,” said Hui.

Everyone ordered their smoothies, including their moms, then sat down to drink them. They all agreed that a refreshing meal was exactly what they needed after their long day of shopping.

Athena smiled to herself, happy to have learned something that could support her friends—especially Conroy.

CHAPTER 7:  
A VISIT WITH DR. DIEGO



**J**ust a couple of weeks before the start of school, Athena's mom drove her, Odin, and Rae to receive their annual checkups. Athena couldn't wait to see their family physician, Dr. Diego. She wanted to tell him some of the things she learned over the summer and ask a few questions about vaccines.

"Come on, Odin!" she called upstairs. "We're going to be late!"

"I'm coming, I'm coming," he said, pulling on his jacket as he walked. "You're the only person who gets excited about a checkup, Athena."

She shrugged. "It's interesting to me."

"I know," said Odin, "but it's annoying to me."

"Let's go, kids," their mom called, and everyone hurried into the car. As she backed out of the driveway, Mama said, "I've already looked over the forms for your appointments. Odin and Rae, you'll be getting the flu vaccine. Athena, you're also due for your Tdap and HPV vaccines."

"What are those for?" Athena asked.

Her mom smiled at her in the rearview mirror. "Ask Dr. Diego to explain them. I think he'll do a better job than me."



Athena's checkup was scheduled first. Unlike Odin and Rae, she was never nervous about going to a doctor's appointment. She always learned something from them.

So, when her name was called, Athena got up from her chair in the lobby and made her way back to the exam room. Dr. Diego was already there, a clipboard in his hand. "Hi, Athena," he said as she sat down on the table. "It's good to see you."

"It's good to see you, Dr. D," Athena replied.

"It's been a while. How are you doing?"

"Pretty well," she told him. "It's been an interesting summer."

"Tell me about it," said Dr. Diego.

And she did. She started by mentioning her grandmother's and Conroy's diagnoses, then reviewed all her research. She could hardly believe she'd learned so much about preventing cancer and even type 2



diabetes. Dr. Diego seemed equally impressed.

“I’m glad to hear that you’re taking your health seriously,” he said.

“Are you having fun, too?”

Athena thought about her time at the beach and at camp. “Yes. I did a lot of fun things this summer.”

“Good,” said Dr. Diego. “Let’s get you ready for sixth grade then.”

“My mom said I’m due for my Tdap and HPV vaccines,” said Athena.

“Can you tell me about them?”

“Of course.” He took Athena’s pulse, then said, “Tdap is actually a combination of three vaccines to protect you from tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis. Tetanus affects your muscles and nerves, diphtheria affects your breathing, and pertussis is a particularly bad cough.”

“Those sound terrible,” said Athena.

“They’re definitely not nice.” Dr. Diego took her blood pressure, then continued, “The HPV vaccine will help protect you from several types of cancer.”

He looked at her, and Athena looked away. After a moment, he said, “Any thoughts on that?”

Athena’s heart was racing, just as it had when she discussed prevention with her parents. *Stop it*, she thought, but that only made her feel worse. At last, she said shortly, “I’m glad to know there’s a vaccine for certain cancers.”

The doctor nodded. “I thought you might be.” He measured Athena’s height and weight, then asked her to sit on the table again. A few quick pinches later, she was vaccinated.

For what felt like a very long time, the room was silent. Athena looked at her hands, at the floor, out the window—anywhere but at Dr. Diego. Finally, she said, “So... am I good to go?”

“If you’re ready,” the doctor replied.

Athena sighed. She still had questions... and concerns.

“You can tell me, Athena.” Dr. Diego smiled.

The words poured out of her so fast, she couldn’t stop them. “I’m afraid of getting sick like my grandma.”

“I know you are,” he said, still smiling. “And that’s okay. It’s scary to watch the people we love suffer.”

She nodded, relieved to be speaking with someone who understood.

“Yes. I feel like I’m never doing enough preventive care.”

“You’re doing a great job, Athena,” Dr. Diego assured her. “You’re healthy and strong, and you’re making different choices than your grandmother did.”

This made Athena feel much better—and like she might cry. Changing the topic slightly, she said, “I read about the vaccination schedule during my research. Can you tell me more about that?”

“Absolutely.” Dr. Diego grabbed a sheet of paper from the counter behind him and held it up. On it was a chart with different ages and vaccines. “The World Health Organization developed an approach called life-course immunization. Did you read about that?”

Athena nodded. “Life-course immunization helps us stay healthy as we get older.”

“Exactly.” He pointed to the chart. “When you were a baby, I gave you

vaccines for things like hepatitis B, rotavirus, and measles. Before you go into seventh grade, I'll give you the MenACWY vaccine, which will help protect you from meningococcal disease. And as an adult, you'll continue to receive booster shots, so you remain protected. Does that make sense?"

Again, Athena nodded. "Do you have an extra copy of this chart? I'd like to take it home."

Dr. Diego smiled and handed her the paper. "Take this one—I have plenty. Life-course immunization is an important health policy, so I discuss it with many of my patients."

Athena perked up. "We talk about health policies at home all the time. They're the rules made by the government to protect us from harm."

"Very good," said Dr. Diego. "You're a bright girl, Athena. I think sixth grade is going to be wonderful for you."

Athena smiled as she hopped off the table. It was comforting to know that she was in good health, and now, she felt ready to begin a new school year.

CHAPTER 8:  
HELLO, SIXTH GRADE



**O**n her first day of sixth grade, Athena got dressed, ate a quick breakfast, and met her friends at the bus stop. Pulling everyone into a group hug, Conroy said, “Here’s to the best year ever.”

“With lots of game nights,” said Zosia.

“Where I will beat you all at charades,” said Hui.

Conroy laughed. “What’s your wish, Thea?”

Athena smiled. “Here’s to having fun and staying healthy.”

“Aw, we should’ve started with that,” Zosia said as the bus pulled up to the curb. She stepped inside, and the rest of the group followed.

When they arrived at school, Athena and her friends chose desks in the middle row and listened as their new teacher, Ms. Nasha, introduced herself. On the whiteboard behind her was a single question: *How was your summer vacation?*

“I’d like each of you to write a paragraph about what you did this summer,” Ms. Nasha said. “Don’t worry—it won’t be graded. I just want to get to know you all, and this should be a fun way to do that.”

Athena looked down at the blank sheet of paper in front of her. Unlike when she tried to write her final essay of fifth grade, ideas were swirling in her mind. There were so many things she could write about, but as Ms. Nasha set a timer for fifteen minutes, Athena settled on the obvious choice.

At the top of the page, she wrote, *The Best Summer Ever*. Then, she began to recall each of the important lessons she’d learned about sun exposure, avoiding tobacco, exercising, nutrition, and vaccines. She noted that she planned to keep researching health policy in her free time and described how powerful it was to feel strong, capable, and excited about a new year. Athena wrote so quickly and with such sincerity that her paper was ripped in two places, and she had to tape it back together.

When the timer went off, Ms. Nasha asked, “Would anyone like to read their paragraph to the class?”

Athena raised her hand. She knew that preventive care was important for everyone, not just her. Ms. Nasha gave her the floor, and Athena stood to face her classmates. When she finished reading, she was pleasantly surprised to see a girl in the front row raise her hand.



“What kind of sunscreen should we be using?” the girl asked.

“Oh, um, SPF 30. That’s what dermatologists recommend for kids.” Athena felt strange, answering questions like a teacher, but the other students didn’t seem to mind. In fact, another hand went up in the back row.

“What type of exercise is good for kids?” a boy asked.

“There are lots,” Athena replied. “I like swimming and playing volleyball, but you can do what you like.”

“You made some excellent points about health policy, Athena,” said Ms. Nasha. She was seated on a chair near the door. “Class, what do you think about creating our own sixth grade policies?”

“Like what?” asked Conroy.

“We could have a policy about being kind!” said the girl in the front row.



“I love that,” said Ms. Nasha. “What else?”

For the rest of the morning, the class worked on their sixth grade policies, which Ms. Nasha wrote on the whiteboard and sent home in an email to the parents. Athena thought it was the perfect way to begin the school year, and her classmates seemed to enjoy it, too.

The rest of the day passed in a blur, and by the time Athena got home, she felt like a new person. Despite its unknowns, this was going to be a great year. She just knew it.



You can practice health policy just like Athena. Positive lifestyle choices like wearing sunscreen, avoiding tobacco, exercising, eating a balanced diet, and staying up to date on your immunizations create a solid foundation of health. Remember, prevention is the best medicine!

THE END



Writing this series of storybooks is a dream come true and is more rewarding than I ever could have imagined. I want kids of all ages to know that working in health policy is as viable as becoming a doctor, an architect, a teacher, or a farmer.

Thank you so much to my teammates for helping me conceptualize and write each book; to our amazing editor, Aquinnah Bree; and to our talented illustrators, Melina Sugliano and Rodrigo Palacios. In creating this series, we have also created a lifelong bond.

- Ana Rita Gonzalez, President & CEO, Policy Wisdom LLC



We truly hope you enjoyed reading this edition in the Athena's  
Adventures in Health Policy series!

We invite you to encourage the young people in your life  
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After a challenging school year, Athena is more than ready for summer vacation to begin. Heartbroken by her grandmother's recent diagnosis, she embarks on a personal quest to learn about cancer prevention.

Through lessons in sun protection, avoiding tobacco, exercising, maintaining a balanced diet, and vaccinating, Athena grows to understand the importance of preventive health policies.

Through Athena's Adventures in Health Policy, Policy Wisdom aims to inspire the next generation of public health professionals and show them the importance and impact of health policies.

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