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## Illness ages tot too quickly

Iraq War vet left Army early to be with ailing daughter

By Michelle Swartz  
Associated Press

FLAT ROCK - Excited for their first child, Joe and Kristy Ratcliffe of Flat Rock never dreamed their daughter would contract a rare, incurable disease.

"Symptoms don't usually show up until around 18 months, but we knew something was wrong much earlier. She was diagnosed before she was 4 months old," her mother said.

Lindsay, who celebrated her second birthday Feb. 24, has progeria, a rare genetic disease that produces rapid aging.

"Children with progeria age eight times faster than normal," Kristy Ratcliffe said.

Only a few months after Lindsay was born, the Ratcliffes realized something was wrong. Though doctors initially told the couple she was fine, physicians at Children's Kansas City Children's Hospital told them otherwise.

"I was in the Army at the time. I was stationed in Fort Riley, Kansas, and we were living on base," said Joe Ratcliffe, who was stationed in Iraq for three months. "After we found out about Lindsay, I asked to be let out early. They eventually let me out of the Army."

The family returned to Flat Rock.

Even though Lindsay's appearance is beginning to hint at a person who should be much older, she is living life as any other 2-year-old. Running, jumping and smiling as she dives into all of her toys in the play area, Lindsay seems as normal as any other child.



(Photo by Kate Lattanzio/Associated Press)

Daddy's girl: Joe Ratcliffe waits for his 2-year-old daughter, Lindsay, to put on her coat as they get ready to leave after eating dinner at the Big Boy in Flat Rock. Lindsay has a rare condition called progeria, which causes rapid aging.

Hair loss, dominant veins showing just beneath the skin and a petite stature - all signs of progeria - already are overcoming her. Comparing a picture of the toddler at her second birthday party to her first, Joe Ratcliffe pointed out her hair loss.

"It was so much fuller just a year ago," he said.

Since the disease accelerates aging, other signs include loss of body fat, aged-looking skin, growth failure, stiffness of joints, prominent eyes, an underdeveloped jaw and small "beak-like" nose. Internal organs also age quickly, causing heart disease or stroke.

With no cure, average life expectancy is 13. However, those with the illness live anywhere from 8 to 21 years old.

Progeria is caused by a mutation in the LMNA gene. It affects one in every 4 million to 8 million children. There is no cure or treatment.

Mentally, however, Lindsay is more than normal.

"She's very smart for a 2-year-old," Kristy Ratcliffe said. "And she'll talk your ear off. Every day she's learning new words."