Living with psoriasis can be tough, especially when you’re young. Just ask 12-year-old Gabe Garza of Chandler, Ariz.

“It is challenging as a teenager to have psoriasis because a lot of kids have made fun of me,” says Gabe, a seventh-grader who is the oldest of three children. “I try to conceal it and avoid people seeing it so I won’t be made fun of. They might think it’s gross.”

Still, as upsetting as it can be to live with the disease and endure hurtful stares and questions about it, Gabe wants to do his part to help find a cure. In 2011, he traveled to Washington, D.C., for National Psoriasis Foundation Capitol Hill Day to help educate lawmakers about psoriasis. “The talk with the lawmakers was thrilling,” he says. “I told them about psoriasis and my life story.”

Psoriasis has been a part of Gabe’s life since early childhood. He was diagnosed when he was in kindergarten.

Gabe has three types of psoriasis: guttate, which appears as small, red spots on the skin; plaque, the most common type of psoriasis, which appears as red, inflamed lesions; and palmar-plantar, which causes pustules on the palms of the hands and soles of the feet.

While he hasn’t experienced a guttate or plaque psoriasis flare-up in some time, he continues to have lesions on his palms. He would like more people to know about the disease and to understand that it is a chronic health condition, not something you can pass to someone else. “I wish people knew that it is not contagious. It’s only a skin disease that causes skin to grow too fast,” he says.

Gabe wants people who have been recently diagnosed with psoriasis or psoriatic arthritis to know that it’s important to stick with a treatment plan that you create with your doctor. “Use your medicine even though it gets annoying after awhile,” he says.

He’s found the greatest success with phototherapy. His parents, Jeff and Drea Garza, bought an in-home light unit for him to use. “That is what finally did it for him. It’s really helped,” says his mother, who also has psoriasis. Finding an effective treatment, she adds, has boosted her son’s spirits.

Gabe has encouraging words for others who are living with psoriasis, particularly those who have trouble coping with less-than-positive remarks they hear about their skin. “Don’t let people’s comments bring you down.”