

My Story: Surviving Cancer and Living with It

Many people have stories of fighting cancer....of surviving it and now we are hearing more and more stories of families living with cancer through their genetic make-up.

Those families living with a hereditary cancer have a gene mutation that gives them a higher than normal chance of getting one of the cancers associated with that specific mutation.

In my case, it's Lynch Syndrome. This is how it all began.

I first had to "live with cancer" 18 years ago when my father was diagnosed with the disease. He was always healthy and outgoing and this diagnosis was such a surprise. At that time, we didn't know of any other immediate family members who had cancer. The day he was diagnosed, they said that the cancer had spread into his liver and they gave him only 3-6 months to live. To my father, this was not acceptable. He was going to fight this with everything he had. With his fight and positive attitude, he surpassed the 6 month mark and lived with colon cancer for a year in a half. He was so amazing throughout this fight but unfortunately, we found it too late.

When my father was diagnosed, we were unaware that years prior his mother, my grandmother, fought bouts of colon and uterine cancers. She also had 3 siblings who had and passed away of cancers consisting of brain, colon and kidney. Un be-known to us, there was something much bigger here. My father was one of four children. In the same month my father was diagnosed, his younger brother, was also diagnosed with colon cancer. Was it hereditary?

It wasn't until 8 years later that I found out these cancers were connected by a gene. It took one more diagnosis of colon cancer to find this out. Mine.

In 2002 at age 29, I was diagnosed with the same cancer that I saw my father work so hard to overcome, colon cancer.

My diagnosis came so quickly and was so unexpected. I always thought I would have colon cancer at some point in my life but not at 29. I had been complaining of a pain in my stomach, one that would not go away. I was working so much and was so stressed with my job that I thought it was an ulcer. I went to my family doctor and she ordered an endoscopy which showed a hiatal hernia. After a few months on prescription medication, my pain was not subsiding. Daily, I was taking Tums and Tylenol to relieve the pain. I went back to my family doctor to discuss my symptoms. She had my family history about colon cancer but she was reluctant to discuss a possibility of having a colonoscopy. I didn't take her comment that "there was nothing else wrong with me" lightly. I was determined to know what was going on. I just had a feeling that this was bigger than a hiatal hernia. I knew that there was something wrong and her dismissing my concerns was frustrating. After a lengthy discussion and my persistence, I finally talked her into ordering a colonoscopy.

Finally, on October 21, 2002, I had the colonoscopy. Dr. Richard Sheets, my gastroenterologist came into my room and mentioned that he had found something during the test. He mentioned that it was either Crohn's disease or cancer. I knew it was cancer. I just had this feeling.

Two days after my initial test, they confirmed that it was cancer. Two days after that, they admitted me into the hospital because they found that I was anemic and then three days later, I was to have surgery to remove the tumor and have a colon resection. Needless to say, it was a whirl wind week. All within 7 days I found out I had cancer and needed surgery.

Shortly after my surgery and once I was strong enough, I started the 6 months of chemo.

During my treatments, the team at the Ohio State University Division of Genetics asked me to be a part of a genetic study for Lynch Syndrome. They thought I would be a good candidate because of my age and my family history. It was confirmed that I had the HNPCC gene or Lynch Syndrome. You see, with Lynch Syndrome, the child of the parent who has the gene mutation has a 50/50 chance of also having the gene. This gene mutation gives the individual a higher than normal chance of having one of the cancers associated with Lynch. During their lifetime, those with Lynch face up to an 85% risk of contracting colon cancer and women have up to a 65% risk of contracting endometrial cancers. There are also other cancers associated with Lynch Syndrome like stomach, pancreas, kidney, brain and skin to name a few.

During this study, my extended family was also tested. My younger sister, my Dad's sister and his other brother tested negative for the gene while it was determined that my father, grandmother, her siblings and my uncle were positive for the HNPCC gene.

In May of 2003, the sweetest words were said....the cancer is gone. I could now concentrate on the rest of my life. Three years later, my husband and I were blessed to have our first son and then two years after that, I had our second son.

Cancer has taken many of my family members but it stops with me. Now that I know about Lynch Syndrome, I will be able to be proactive with my children's lives even if they have that 50/50 chance.

The next chapter in my life is to take care of my family and to make people aware of Lynch Syndrome and hereditary cancers. I now have the power to face Lynch head on for my family as well as myself. I hope my story will give those unaware of Lynch and other hereditary cancers the knowledge to be proactive with their health and if they are faced with cancer, the power to take it head on.

This year a portion of the Step and Stride Fitness & Fashion 5K proceeds will benefit the Hereditary Colon Cancer Fund at The Ohio State University Comprehensive Cancer Center – Arthur G. James Cancer Hospital and Richard J. Solove Research Institute. [Click](#) to register.