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## YOUR BODY empowered patient

“I’LL NEVER FORGET WHERE I WAS the moment I learned I had melanoma.”

by NORAH O'DONNELL, CBS THIS MORNING ANCHOR



A DAY AT THE BEACH Norah and Geoff with Riley, now almost 9 (left), and twins Grace and Henry, now 10, last summer.

It was the day after Thanksgiving last year, and I'd escaped a house full of family for some alone time and much-needed retail therapy. I was in the home section of Bloomingdale's looking at some gorgeous bed linens when my phone buzzed. It was an email from my dermatologist.

I'd been at her office just that week for the routine skin check I'd put off for a couple of years. The email read, *I'm sorry to bother you during the holiday, but your biopsy came back and we need to talk.* Worried, I forwarded the email to my sister, Mary, who also happens to be my best friend and a surgeon. "It's probably basal cell or squamous cell carcinoma," she quickly wrote back. Those two types of cancer account for the vast majority of skin cancer diagnoses. My family is of Irish descent, with fair, freckled skin. Both my parents had been diagnosed and treated years ago, but there had never been a reason to panic. Surely there was nothing to worry about now, either. But I felt my anxiety building. Why couldn't

this wait at least until Monday? Tears welled up in my eyes. I sat on one of the store's display beds, took a deep breath and called my dermatologist, Elizabeth K. Hale, M.D. There wasn't much small talk. "Your biopsy came back. It's melanoma," she said. I was stunned. Atop a mountain of high-thread-count linens and fluffy pillows, I suddenly wanted to crawl under the covers and hide. I'd heard the word "melanoma," and I knew it tended to be aggressive and fast-moving—the kind of skin cancer you hear about people dying from. As Dr. Hale's words began to sink in, "stunned" turned into "scared." Her voice snapped me back into the moment: "Norah, are you there?" "Yes, sorry. I am," I replied. →

LIVE LIGHTER

Fancy up water with citrus and/or cucumber—you'll drink more.

JUNE 2017 GH 89

## YOUR BODY empowered patient

"The good news is that we caught it early, and it's 100% curable," Dr. Hale continued. "But I want to operate as soon as possible." I heard myself murmur "Yes, OK" and told her I'd call for an appointment.

I made my way through the Black Friday crowds toward the exit, my mind reeling, my chest constricting. Tears were running down my face now. I felt trapped. I couldn't understand how this could have happened to me. I took good care of myself—was this somehow my fault? Why had I waited to get my checkup?

### MY CRASH COURSE IN CANCER

As soon as I reached my car, I called my parents. My dad, a doctor, and my mom, a scientist, were to see the pathology report. The report showed the diagnosis as "melanoma in situ." The translation of the Latin *in situ* is "in place"—in this case, on the surface, meaning the melanoma was in the epidermis, the most superficial layer of skin. It was noninvasive in that it had not yet reached deeper into the dermis, where there are blood and lymph vessels through which cancer cells can spread (metastasize) to the rest of the body. It was technically Stage 0 cancer.

Because I'm a journalist, my instinct was to dive in and learn more about melanoma. I'd known it was no joke, but I'd had no idea how deadly it was. Although melanoma accounts for fewer than 1% of skin cancer cases, it is responsible for the vast majority of skin cancer deaths—thousands each year, according to the Skin Cancer Foundation. It's the leading cause of cancer death in young women.

The more research I did, the clearer it became: I probably could have prevented my cancer altogether. That was tough to digest. I grew up in San Antonio, where the temperature pushes 100 degrees in the summer. We spent hours in the pool, many times without sunscreen. And in high school, I visited a tanning salon, especially before prom. I confessed all this to Dr. Hale. "People who first indoor-tan before age 35 have a 75% increased chance of melanoma," she told me. And more people get skin cancer because of tanning than develop lung cancer because of smoking. Just think about that!

### THE HARD TRUTH

We scheduled the surgery for a few weeks later, after the biopsy site had healed. Then came the worst part of this whole ordeal: telling my three children.

"So, wait...you have cancer?" asked my daughter Riley, who was 8. "Yes, but don't worry—the doctor is going to cut it out," I replied, trying to put a positive spin on things.

"But is there any chance you could die from the surgery?" asked Henry, who was 9, as his twin sister, Grace, listened silently. "I'm absolutely not going to die," I assured him. "I mean, eventually I will. But not from this surgery."

Telling the kids was a decision I struggled with. My husband, Geoff, and I try to be as open with our children as possible, so it seemed like the right thing to do. But as I left my daughters' bedroom that night, I was flooded with guilt. I felt horrible for worrying them. What had I been thinking? But I was scared and, perhaps selfishly, I appreciated their deep concern.

Just after the New Year, I went to Dr. Hale's office to have the cancer removed. She cut a three-inch-long piece of skin from the upper left corner of my back. The procedure required 25 stitches to close and would need a lot of attention as it healed. Thankfully, I had helpers at home to see that I had a smooth recovery. Riley and Grace took turns putting a healing ointment on the scar on my back, which I couldn't reach. "You are very lucky, Norah," Dr. Hale said after the procedure. "That mole was progressing. In a few months, it could have been very different."

### STAYING VIGILANT

Five months later, the scar is bright red. You'd be able to see it staring at you if I was wearing a strapless dress. The scar will likely always be there; I choose to see it not as something ugly, but as a reminder that early detection saves lives—it might even have saved mine. And while the scar represents the end of a scary chapter in my life, it also marks the beginning of a new wellness journey.

Because my risk is so high, I now see Dr. Hale every three to four months. She keeps a close eye on me, which often means multiple biopsies. My last visit required two. I texted my dad that my body was starting to look a bit like the moon: full of craters. *Better craters than cancer*, he replied. He's right, of course.

Check out our story on page 24 for expert stay-safe summer sun tips.

“Growing up, we spent hours in the pool, many times without sunscreen. And in high school, I visited a tanning salon. The more research I did, the clearer it became: I probably could have prevented my cancer altogether.”

