

Laurie Wenham

1st Diagnosed at age 26 with 2mm melanoma Stage II upper right arm

2nd Diagnosed at age 27 with In-situ melanoma on thigh

3rd Diagnosed at age 28 with 0.5mm melanoma left arm pit

4th Diagnosed at age 29 with 0.6mm melanoma right arm pit

Oct 2012 Diagnosed at age 38 with Stage IV melanoma

I am a fair skinned blonde that really had an addiction to the sun and the tan it would give me. All that mattered was getting a tan...which wasn’t easy for my fair skin. At 16 years old I started going to tanning beds 3-5 times a week year-round. I did this for the next 10 years straight (1990-2000.) It never occurred to me that I was doing something bad to myself. I was in my 20’s and immortal. I even thought it was crazy that I was paying all kinds of money for health insurance and I got rid of that.

I had noticed a red mole on my upper right arm for a while. It was ugly and it would peel. Out of vanity alone, I scheduled an appointment with a doctor just to get it removed. I went to 5 different doctors and all of them said it was nothing. One said it was probably a blood blister and would just bleed a lot if we removed it. Another said that it would not be covered by insurance because it was a cosmetic procedure. I told the last one, that I didn’t care if it cost me...it was ugly and I wanted it removed. So he referred me to a doctor that would remove it. I thought that was the end of that. I was on with my life and went right from the biopsy to a job interview that afternoon.

I got the call the next day that I got the job and they were flying me from California to Florida in 6 days. I was so happy and care free. Then the next day, I got a call from my dermatologist. He was calling me from home on his day off. He said it was urgent that we talk and that he needed to get me into the operating room in the next 4 days.

I was first diagnosed with Melanoma in California in April 2000 when I was 26 years old. It was a 2mm melanoma on my upper arm. The doctor actually told me that if I didn’t have surgery immediately – I wouldn’t live through the next 2 years. They surgically removed that and went in after a few of my lymph nodes as well. They didn’t find any bad nodes. I thought I was done and had had all the surgery that was needed and all the cancer was gone. Even though the doctor said there was a chance the melanoma could spread and pop-up later, I never thought that it would happen to me - but it did. I started having excisions weekly for the next couple years. Seemed the doctors were always finding questionable moles that needed to go. And I got another melanoma on my leg in 2001, another under my right arm pit in 2002, and then another under my left side arm pit in November of 2003.

I also got real sick in the Fall of 2003. I had the flu for 2 and a half months and I was throwing up for 9 days straight. I was in and out of so many doctors offices and they couldn't figure it out. That is when they then found my 4th melanoma on the left arm pit. So that, coupled with the flu, and having had 80 or 90 excisions, I had hit bottom. I knew I was losing my battle. I had to make some changes and I had to make them fast.

My family did everything they could to help me. They did some research online and found all kinds of info on more holistic and alternative means. So what I did was change my diet to mostly organic fruits and veggies, changed my products that I use in the shower and added a shower filter, changed all beauty products and makeup to all organic and natural, changed my cleaning products in the house to all natural, changed my work schedule so I make sure I get 8 hours of sleep a night, exercised every morning, made sure I drank good water, drank at least one cup of green tea everyday, if not 2 or 3 cups, drank Barleygreen - which is a 6 oz. grass drink - which by drinking, gives you the nutrients of a pound of greens, and I added all kinds of vitamins and supplements as well.

Basically, I was healthy and cancer free from that moment on...from November 2003 to 2009. No more excisions either. Life was back to normal. Then in 2009 I started to get lazy. I stopped eating so healthy and I stopped taking all the vitamins. It was expensive keeping up that lifestyle. I went right back to the Standard American Diet (SAD). I started eating the usual junk and I started using all the chemical makeup on my skin. I didn’t really think about it anymore as it had been so long since I had even thought about cancer. In my mind, I was healthy and free from cancer forever.

Well, I didn’t put two-and-two together at the time, but I started getting sick with colds, flu, allergies, and bronchitis about every month. I just seemed to catch every cold that was going around and it always lingered extra long. It never occurred to me that any of those problems could occur because of my poor diet.

Then in August of 2012 I had a preventative scan and it showed that a lymph node in my right arm pit had increased in size from a previous scan. After several tests, on October 1, 2012, I was told it was Metastatic Melanoma, Stage IV, spread throughout many lymph nodes all across my upper body, wrapped around my esophogus and wrapped around my heart, and a mass on my liver. It had spread from one of my melanomas about 12 years prior.

I actually had that conversation with my doctor that most people fear and think won’t happen to them…that they really don’t have a lot to offer me in the way of treatment. Radiation would not work and standard chemo would only give me a few extra months of life, but not a quality of life I’d want, and surgery would be far too invasive and wouldn’t be something I would likely survive.

There were three options that could possibly work. There was a drug that might do something, but would deliver terrible side effects with a terrible quality of life. And there was one other drug that would deliver much worse side effects than the first drug. The third option was an immunotherapy clinical trial that had just started in humans, so they didn’t really know yet if that would work either.

Some people might have felt defeated in that moment, like there was nothing they could do. And for me, I was shocked for sure and definitely felt that way. But after about a week or two of just pure shock and devastation, I actually sat down by myself and thought about it for a few minutes. I had kept the cancer dormant for about 12 years. That is quite the feat. So it had to have been my clean and healthy diet from 2003-2009 that had kept it quiet. So I just made the decision to go back to all my healthy, all natural ways. At the very least, doing that would give my immune system the best chance possible to fight off whatever drug or radiation was going to be thrown at me. My idea was to pump my body up with healthy, live foods because I knew the doctors were going to prescribe something awful.

I then made the decision to start the clinical trial at Dana Farber Cancer Institute on October 31st, 2012. It is a PD1 immunotherapy called MK-3475 (or Lambrolizumab or Pembro or now approved by the FDA as of Sept 2014 at Keytruda). It is an infusion given once every three weeks. It is different from standard treatments, as it doesn’t tear down the immune system, but instead it builds it up. In my eyes, that was a great option for me. I kept up with the healthy organic eating and did all I could to be healthy while I kept working full time and went through the treatments. I learned more about diseases and health and the foods we eat and the products we put on, and in, our bodies. I learned what I feel is an important piece of information....that disease cannot thrive in an alkaline and oxygenated environment. So if you eat alkaline healthy foods instead of acidic junk foods...you can change your body’s alkalinity.

I also purchased a mini-trampoline (also referred to as a Rebounder.) I know it seems like a different thing to do, but I had looked into it and found out that even light bouncing on one of these is excellent for the lymphatic system. Our lymph nodes do not have a pump. They take in all the toxins and they don’t have a system that pumps the toxins out of them. You must exercise to get them to pump the toxins out. And rebounding acts as a zero-gravity pump, to pump all the toxins out of the lymph system. Just 10 minutes a day on the Rebounder and I feel that really helps.

In January 2013, after 3 months of treatment and a healthy diet, all the many lymph nodes shrunk down to normal size and the mass on my liver disappeared. There was only that one bad lymph node in my right arm pit that was larger than all the others and more aggressive. It had doubled in size in those three months. And then in April 2013, 6 months into treatment, all was still clear on my scans except that one bad lymph node had continued to grow in size yet again and was now the size of a peach. The doctors were ready to take me off of treatment and wanted to get me in for surgery to remove as much as they could….when one night, a week before I was to scan, I experienced quite a bit of pain in my right arm pit and it kept me up for many hours of stabbing pains every 5-8 seconds. I woke in the morning and that tumor was the size of a baseball and it was hanging out of my arm pit. I packed my bag and got ready for the doctor to tell me I needed emergency surgery….but instead they said they thought that it blew up and was dying.

They scanned me so they could see what was going on. The doctors said that the tumor did indeed blow up and it was liquefying and dying and it would shrink back down. This means that the treatment is working. Well, the tumor did shrink back down...and it kept shrinking every 5 weeks by about 15% until Christmas 2013 when I got the call that it had shrank down to normal size and they didn’t see any evidence of disease. Amazing news!!!

Very little was known about this immunotherapy at the time, as it was just newly being tested on humans…but it was working. So they kept me on treatment indefinitely. I did well and was healthy and I kept up my strict diet for a few years.

Around mid 2016 I started to get an anxious feeling...wondering how much was too much of the drug treatment? How much was too much so that it started to hurt other organs in my body? I woke daily with this question on my mind as I started to feel more joint pains that were likely a result of the drug. And the thought on my mind every day was that I needed to come off the drug.

So on January 3rd, 2017, I came off of treatment...after about 4.5 years. My doctors were supportive and agreed with my decision, and planned to monitor my bloods and scans every three months.

So now, as of October 26, 2021, I just got my most recent scan results and I am healthy and am still doing great and scanning every six months.

I feel quite lucky. I feel that I made the quick decision to help my body get better right away, and that was a huge win for me.

My boss gave me two pieces of information that really helped a lot at the beginning of my stage 4 battle. He is a doctor that bases everything in life on scientific evidence. He told me that there are two things proven by science to help people....keep a positive attitude and eliminate stress. I kept my attitude up and I tried to make sure there was less stress in my life. My mantra was, and is, “I got this...I can do this!” I kept saying to myself that as long as I felt fine, then I could give my body what it needed to get better. I had to put faith in the fact that I was doing all the right things for me...so I believed I was getting better. I couldn’t waste time feeling bad for myself and worrying.

This is just my story and the choices I have made for myself. Doing all the things I’ve done are what I feel were the right things for me to do.

A side note: our skin is our body’s largest organ. A little thing that people really just overlook or don’t think about is that everything we put on our skin is absorbed through our skin and into our bloodstream. Therefore, all chemicals, cleaners, shampoos, deodorants, lotions, and makeup are all absorb into our bloodstream and our bodies are forced to figure out how to deal with those chemicals. It puts a toll on our bodies over time. Not every person is going to have trouble, but there are some of us that are made differently and have to treat our immune systems with kid-gloves.