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Chasing a Tan

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Skin cancer entered my life when I was 22 years old. I am a fair skinned, freckled person. I had spent about 6 months chasing a pretty tan in a tanning bed. I distinctly remember the moment I first noticed what I thought was a pimple on my right shoulder. It was New Year's Eve 1999; I was getting ready to go on a date with my future husband Justin. I was mortified by this ugly red spot on my shoulder that was ruining the look of my spaghetti strap dress. I am a person who cannot leave well enough alone so I scratched and picked and poked at this spot and in return it bled and cracked and grew. Being young skin cancer didn't even cross my mind.

A few months later when this tiny red bump grew into a convoluted crusty growth on my shoulder that was hurting and irritated, I showed my mom. She literally screamed and handed me \$50 and told me to go to the doctor right that second. At that moment I became concerned and listened. I started at an immediate care place and was told to go to my primary care doctor. My primary care doctor took one look and said, "It looks like a big ole skin cancer." *What?! I am 22 - how can I have skin cancer?* My doctor didn't want to touch it because of the size, and needed to be removed by a plastic surgeon.

At this time it was about the size of a nickel and probably half an inch thick. I had the surgery to remove the growth and ended up with a 7 inch scar running lengthwise on my shoulder. They had to make a or Wide Local Excision (WLE) which removes the growth plus approximately 5mm extra around the entire area to make sure that they get all of it. About a week later I got the results of squamous cell carcinoma. This is a cancer that is typically seen in older people. Luckily there was no further treatment needed. I was told to stay out of the sun, use sunscreen when outdoors, and see a dermatologist regularly. What I didn't know was that I would be fearful of every new thing that would appear on my skin. Over the next few years I had two more WLEs with benign results (non-cancerous).

In 2012, I began having terrible itching on my arms, it was quite bothersome. I finally (after procrastinating) took myself to my dermatologist; I hadn't seen her in many years at this point. I followed the rules - I never tanned ever again. I didn't purposely let myself get sunburned and I was still diligent about checking every bump or skin change. While I was having my itchy arms looked at she did a full skin exam and noticed a couple of spots on my right shoulder that she didn't care for. One was a large brown freckle and the other was a 7mm flat freckle. Neither of them concerned her too much but she wanted them taken off because of my history.

When I didn't receive my results after having these two new freckles removed, I got a little concerned. I finally called and the nurse said she would have to call me back. My heart sank and the pit in my stomach grew. When she called me back she said that my biopsy showed that I had a very early melanoma called a lentigo maligna. It can be a very slow growing cancer that is usually seen in people over 60. She wanted me to bring someone in with me to meet with her the next day. I was going to have to have another WLE done to make sure that the margins were clear. This was in almost the exact same spot as my original squamous cell carcinoma in 1999. I was told that I would have to come see the dermatologist every three months, and needed to tell my hairstylist, gynecologist and even dentist that I have had melanoma and that we need to be on the lookout for any new moles, freckles or changes in my skin. She also told my husband Justin that he would have to help me perform

skin checks monthly. A few days later I nervously had another WLE performed. My mother came with me. She asked the doctor what would have happened if we hadn't caught this. He said flatly, "It would kill her."

The margins were clear, which was great. However, I ended up with a staph infection in the site that put me in the hospital for four days. I had to be on IV antibiotics and have the incision reopened. Once it was reopened it could not be closed. The spot that was originally 7mm was now a huge open wound measuring 4" around and ½" deep. We spent the next 8 weeks cleaning and packing this wound, hoping to not have a skin graft. It finally healed without having a skin graft.

I am now a young widow raising three children, so ensuring I stay healthy has taken on even more importance. Protect your children's skin in the sun; protect your skin, don't use tanning beds.

Chasing that pretty tan just isn't worth the risk.

