

A Melanoma Diary

Leah Adams, 29, of Cleveland, is a Stage I melanoma survivor. She also helps care for her dad, who has Stage IV melanoma.

June 12, 2023 As Told To [Bob Barnett](#)

I started running when I was 19 and still love it. I've run three marathons, a half-marathon and lots of 5Ks and 10Ks. I used to love being in the sun. Growing up, the models I looked up to were always thin and tan. Maybe I never saw myself as being pretty or beautiful. But I did when I was tan. We didn't use sunscreen, and I used tanning beds on and off for about 10 years, even though I saw those big warning signs about skin cancer. When you're young, you feel invincible.

August 2019

I had graduated with a master's degree in social science administration and started a job as a program manager for the National Kidney Foundation. My dad had a suspicious mole on his back—it was oozing—so my mom told him to get it checked out. It was Stage 0 melanoma, the earliest stage. He had it removed as an outpatient. [Editor's note: Stage 0 melanoma means the cancer is in the outer skin only. In Stage I, the tumor is small, while in Stage II, it's larger, but neither has spread to lymph nodes. Stage III has spread to one or more sentinel (nearby) lymph nodes but not to distant parts of the body. Stage IV has spread (metastasized) to other parts of the body.]

September 2019

After that, my mom started paying more attention to my moles. I have a lot, like my dad. One was on the right side of my chest. It was black in the middle and brown on the outside with a red ring around it. So I got a scan at the end of September. They took a biopsy, asked if I had a family history of melanoma. I told them about my father.

October 2019

I got the call. It was Stage I melanoma. Luckily, I wasn't alone; I was with my boyfriend on a trip. They wanted to remove it as soon as possible and also remove and biopsy three sentinel lymph nodes to see if it had spread. I felt very alone, shocked, sad—and mad at myself because I felt I gave myself cancer.

November–December 2019

I got the surgery on November 6. The procedure took two hours, but I had to be in the hospital for

eight. The lymph nodes were negative. The stitches had to stay on a long time, so I had keloid scars. They're painful, and I have to treat them, even now.

First thing when I woke up, I asked when I could run again. "Oh, you won't be running for quite some time," they told me. Running could rip the stitches. That was hard for me. For a month and a half, I was in a depressed state. I still felt alone and too ashamed to share.

But at the end of 2019, I realized I could either keep having this pity party—I'm not beautiful anymore; I can't tan—or I could change my life. So I shared my scar online. It blew up with likes and shares—and support. And you know, it was caught early. I got lucky. I was now completely more vigilant about my skin care. I started running again.

March 2020

The pandemic hit. Scans were canceled because of COVID. I didn't get one until the end of 2020. That caused a lot of anxiety.

December 2020–January 2021

I really started to advocate about sun safety and skin cancer and melanoma. I got involved with the Melanoma Research Alliance, the Melanoma Research Foundation and Impact Melanoma. I filled out the contact pages, saying, "I'm a survivor. I want to help."

Then, on January 30, my dad had a seizure while driving my mom. He was rushed to the hospital. They found lesions in his brain and more lesions in his lungs. He had Stage IV metastatic melanoma.

February 2021

It was during peak COVID, so I couldn't even see my dad in the hospital. His brain metastases had caused the seizure. Both the lung and brain lesions were inoperable. He had his driver's license taken away because he had had a seizure. He was a driver for Amazon, so he retired early. He was 62.

March 2021

My dad started Gamma Knife radiation for the brain metastasis. In a two-week period, he had four rounds of radiation, the first COVID vaccine and dual-agent immunotherapy. The drugs sent him back to the hospital. They caused inflammation in his brain, causing seizure-like activity. He went down to one immunotherapy drug, and things got more stable, but side effects from radiation landed him in the hospital five times over nine months.

April 2021

I became an ambassador for sun-protective clothing companies and did promotions for sunscreen companies. Free sunscreen and clothing are my only compensation, but I'm fine with that. It's all I need as a melanoma survivor. The number of companies making affordable and fashionable sun-safe clothing now is awesome.

October 2021

I ran my first marathon since melanoma! I ran for Impact Melanoma in the Boston Marathon. My dad was at the race, cheering me on. It was such an amazing experience.

April 2022

I went on my first beach vacation as a melanoma survivor. We went to Naples, Florida. I was pretty nervous. You know, the Sunshine State? It was a little triggering. I can't get a tan anymore, so I got a spray tan. We went out in the morning before the sun got really hot. I went through a bottle and a half of sunscreen that week. The hardest part was seeing people on the beaches just looking like raisins. I'm like, Holy cow, have you ever had a skin check? Are you wearing sunscreen?

December 2022

I had my three-month scan, which was negative. My oncologist told me I could now go to six-month scans. I said, "I appreciate that, but I'm not ready for that."

February 2023

My dad had a bronchoscopy, which showed that his lung inflammation was from immunotherapy, not cancer. His melanoma is responding to treatment. But he has memory and some cognitive issues from the dead tissue in his brain and adrenal insufficiency from powerful steroids. He will have to be watched for the rest of his life. Once you've had cancer, your life revolves around scans.

March 2023

I went to my dermatologist and had two biopsies, but they were benign moles. My dad got his driver's license back after 26 months. My mom drove him places. I did too. I'm an only child, so it's just me helping my mom and dad. And he didn't like that. A lot of things were taken from him, but he'll tell you that he's gained more quality time with his daughter and wife.

April 2023

Since I started sharing my story, I can't tell you how many messages I get every week. People say, "I got a skin check because of your story," or "I wear sunscreen now." It motivates me to do more. Melanoma rates are increasing. So here's what I want to say: Have you gotten a skin check with a dermatologist yet? Skin checks can save your life. They saved mine.