The Call

I found a lump on my testicle during a self-exam, but I was hesitant to make a phone call.

December 8, 2016 By Justin Birckbichler

While I had strong intentions of making calls immediately when I returned to Virginia after finding a lump on my testicle, I already had tons of commitments to attend to first. We picked up our puppy on Sunday, I had lesson plans to prepare, and my parents were coming on Thursday. I love being the center of attention when it's my choice, but I hate being a burden to people so I will keep things in so I don't upset other people. I didn't want to make Mal worried when she was having her first week with her puppy, nor did I want to tell my parents about this issue quite yet. I decided to wait until they had left the following weekend to make calls. I continued closely monitoring myself and did not notice any major changes during these few days.

On top of this whole worry, we had just moved to a different area in Virginia. My primary care physician was still in Front Royal, which was about two hours from our new home. I had to find a brand new doctor and essentially ask them to fondle me on the first time. I usually don't even kiss on the first date.

Of course, these are all excuses related to a much bigger issue — men's health isn't a frequent topic of discussion.

Society has such skewed visions of men talking about their health — we're supposed to be seen as strong and able to heal ourselves. According to a 2016 study by the Cleveland Clinic, only three in five men actually go to their annual physical, and just over 40 percent go to the doctor only when they have a serious medical condition. 53% of all the men surveyed reported that their health just isn't something they talk about, and 19 percent admitted they will only go to the doctor to stop nagging from their significant other, a point I can usually understand.

Simply put, most guys don't like to go to the doctor. I am no different. In fact, I could probably be the poster child for not going to the doctor unless someone forces me. Towards the end of the last school year, I was unable to talk between a sore throat and feeling incredibly lethargic. I still refused to go to the doctor because I don't like going to the doctor. Overall, I have been pretty healthy in my life, so I didn't really see the need to waste two hours of my day filling out paperwork and answering routine questions from the doctor. Yes, I feel fine. No, I don't have a cough. No, I've still never smoked. Yes, this is total waste of my time.

However, what I was experiencing didn't feel on the same level as a sore throat. And, though I have a very healthy ego, I wasn't arrogant enough to think that something like testicular cancer

could never happen to me. I started looking into statistics about testicular cancer occurrence in men of my age. What I discovered was surprising: about half of testicular cancers occur in men between the ages of 20 and 34.

I wanted to defy the odds on men's health

I told Mallory I wanted to see a doctor, and after she was done commending me for actually agreeing to see one, she asked our neighbors for advice and they recommended a family practice close to our home. On October 18, I made a call to schedule an appointment. Of course, being a teacher, the only time I could call was during my planning period. Calling the doctor and saying the word "testicle" in school was a bigger concern to me than anything at that point, as sometimes students come back to grab a forgotten library book. Luckily, no one interrupted, and I made a doctor's appointment for October 20th. It is a testament to medical practices how quickly they can get you in as soon as you say "lump in my testicle" (and also to be able to avoiding laughing while saying it).

At this point, I knew I had to let more people in on this than just Mallory and me. Not out of desire, but mainly out of necessity. The first person I knew I had to tell was my principal, Brian. The whole reason we had relocated was because I had just started at a new school. It was not a conversation I was looking forward to, but do you blame me? I had worked there for barely a month, and I was about to go talk to boss about my balls. Again, usually I don't even mention a kiss on the first date.

Talking about your testicles is an extremely personal matter, but men's health as a whole is an under-discussed issue.

Men will avoid talking about it out of embarrassment, especially in a professional environment, which makes sense. It's awkward. But I've overheard women in the teacher's lounge and hallways openly talking about lumps in their breasts, thanks to a widespread awareness and acceptance of breast cancer. Why should it be different for men? Having these open conversations about testicular health, along with regular self-checks, is the key to early action.

Despite my initial fears of embarrassment and unprofessionalism, I told Brian about my medical concern and said I had made an appointment for later in the week. He was 100% supportive and has been this entire time. From the start, he has said, "Nothing is more important than your health. You take care of you, and we'll take care of the kids." That is truly the mark of a strong principal and further solidified my appreciation for making this choice to join this school.

As the date of my first doctor's appointment drew closer, for some reason, in my head, I already knew I had testicular cancer.

Click here to read the next part of my story, in which I have my first ultrasound.

On Thursdays, I am chronicling my journey from discovery to the beginning of chemotherapy. To read through my story up until this point, please click here.

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