The Discovery

Finding a lump on my testicle during a self-exam would be part one of my testicular cancer journey.

December 1, 2016 By Justin Birckbichler

Friday, October 7, was field day. It was a fun time, and I even participated in many of the activities with my students. The glory of capture the flag and beating my principal, Brian, in a tire relay buoyed my spirits. Talk about making a good impression at my new school — by destroying Brian in front of my whole class and numerous parent volunteers. It was also a half day that day, which worked out well. After the students were released, I left school quickly. I had a flight to catch to Kentucky for my first ever shadow event for an EdTechTeam Google Educator Bootcamp. Not only would I be part of this event, but I would also be shadowing my Google for Education Certified Innovator mentor, which was the first time I would meet Donnie. Between field day, the early release, the excitement of the Bootcamp and meeting Donnie, I thought it was going to be such an incredible weekend.

How wrong I was. I don't often fly, but 2016 has been the year I have traveled most. When I booked my flights for the Bootcamp, I chose what I thought was the closest airport. I was mistaken. However, I didn't discover this until 10 minutes to departure at my gate in Dulles, the airport I was flying out from. Clearly, listening to an audiobook and chowing down on some Chipotle took precedence over verifying distances. I discovered that the airport was 25 miles from my hotel, and the hotel was 90 miles from the Bootcamp. Rightfully so, I started freaking out. Luckily, some friends helped me to settle down and get arrangements made. I knew making it to the Bootcamp would require lots of driving, but in the end, it would be worth it. The weekend started looking up.

A self-exam reveals a lump on my testicle

Just kidding — my luck only got worse in the morning. As I was showering, I felt a suspicious lump in my left testicle. (As an aside here, the word testicle is funnier to me than ball or nut or any common vernacular, but I'm trying to be professional here). I knew the routine for self-checks.* They're best done after a shower, when the scrotum is relaxed, and they're pretty easy: Just place your index and middle fingers under the testicle with your thumb on top. Firmly but gently, roll the testicle between your fingers. Any weird lumps or bumps should be checked out by a doctor. I knew the drill.

I had grown rather attached to my testicles over the past 25 years (well, they were more attached to me) so, as I stood there in the shower, I knew something didn't feel quite right.

This wasn't the first time I had felt it either. In mid-September, in a similar showering episode, I had felt what felt to be a pea-sized hard lump. I thought back to my annual checkup (which I had neglected this year) and how the doctor always described lumps as something to take seriously. What I was feeling seemed to fit the bill.

I told my fianceé, Mallory, about it, and she started getting a little anxious. Rightfully so, since the prior year, she had gone through a similar scare after finding a lump in her breast. It shook her to her core, but luckily it was determined to be something other than a tumor and she had it removed. I was hesitant to tell her, as I did not want to bring back bad memories, but I did anyway. I undersold the situation a little bit and told her between not being sure what it was and my old health insurance giving me very little coverage, I would continue monitoring it at least until my new insurance kicked in.

Did I imagine a lump on my testicle or was I feeding into the stigma of men's health?

The following day, when I went to check myself again, I did not feel anything. Perhaps my skin had folded in a strange manner the prior day or maybe the lump had shifted in my scrotum and I couldn't feel it anymore. Looking back, my decision to forget about my discovery for awhile could have been because I was just being a typical guy — ignoring a symptom because "guys don't go to the doctor."

Or maybe my uneventful health history caused me to be less worried. Perhaps, because there was no "pain" associated with the lump (like many testicular cancer survivors mention), I thought it was nothing. To be perfectly honest, I felt 100% healthy and fine. Just a few weeks ago, I had completed a Spartan Sprint and was jogging in the mornings before school. I had no fatigue, headaches, swelling, fever, or anything that indicated I was sick. Either way, I didn't feel anything at the time, so I apologized to Mal for working her up and put it out of my mind.

This time, the self-exam definitely showed me a mass on my testicle

Of course, I thought of that moment again on that fateful October morning in Kentucky. This time, as I checked myself in the shower, I definitely felt something, and it was bigger than I remembered. Whereas in September, it was one small pea-sized lump, this felt larger. There also seemed to be more areas of concern. For lack of a better way to describe it, think of a jellyfish wrapped around a rock (or, for you sci-fi fans, a face-hugger alien). Now, just a few short weeks later, that's what it felt like around my left testicle. I knew I couldn't put this issue off any longer. My insurance had just kicked in, and I needed to make some calls.

Click here to read the next part of my story, in which I call a doctor for the first time in years.

Regular self-checks are the main way testicular cancer is detected early in men. It may be awkward to tell a guy in your life to "Go play with yourself," but it could save their life. Please take a moment to share this post with as many men (of any age) as you know. Like I said, I felt perfectly healthy, and the only indication that something was wrong was the lump. This may help them to think about it more seriously. Leave their reactions in the comments below.

On Thursdays, I am chronicling my testicular cancer journey from discovery to the beginning of chemotherapy. This is the first post in the series.

This post originally appeared on A Ballsy Sense of Tumor. It is republished with permission.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.cancerhealth.com/blog/discovery