My Five-Year Scan: The End of An Era

Another milestone in my cancer journey: a clean five-year scan

January 2, 2022 By Justin Birckbichler

Ever since I was first told that I had testicular cancer in 2016, one of my biggest goals has been to get to the five year mark of being cancer free. For whatever reason, that's always felt like a big milestone. Perhaps it's because after five years the recurrence rate drops to the same risk likelihood as the rest of the general population. Or maybe it's just because I insist on having the TV volume in increments of five and the same logic applies here. Regardless, that shining "Five Year Scan Day" finally arrived this past week.

I've been hanging out in doctor's offices quite a lot recently, due to the fact that I am recovering from foot surgery—more on that in an upcoming blog post. I had my CT scan on the same day I got a cast put on my leg and foot, so I couldn't drive myself to the imaging center or move around well. Big shout-outs to both my girlfriend and the imaging center staff for getting me to the facility and pushing me in a wheelchair throughout the center, respectively. A big kudos to the tech who chose to stand on top of the wheelchair to take this year's scan pic.

The general procedure was the same. There was also a new CT machine, so no more "Breathe in. Hold your breath." Hindsight being 20/20, I should have written down what it said, but I think it said something like "You can breathe now."

Ironically, that's what I needed to hear in the many previous scans. While scans in the first few years caused me a lot of scanxiety, I really didn't worry about it much this time. At this point, it's just all part of life for me as a cancer survivor.

The results

I've noticed that the results of various medical tests have been coming back fast. Whereas I used to have to wait about five days until the follow up appointment, a lot of results have been in my patient portal within two days or less. Thanks, COVID?

True to form, these results were loaded within 24 hours: "No convincing acute abnormality. No convincing evidence for metastatic disease." That's some fancy doctor talk for no cancer in my body. It's now official—I had made it to that five year mark I had been coveting.

If we're splitting hairs, the official five years from diagnosis won't occur until October, but since I am trying to max out my insurance before the end of August, I was able to get my scans and

follow up appointment done early. However, it doesn't sound nearly as monumental to say my four-years-and-ten-months scan.

Follow up with Dr. Maurer

My appointment with Dr. Maurer was three days after the scan. To make a long story short, everything went well. We spent the majority of time catching up since I hadn't seen him since December. He was pleased with the scans and how my survivorship has progressed.

Regarding next steps, I am going to have another round of blood work at his office in January, and then it will be handled with my primary care doctor as part of my annual physical.

He also said that he doesn't intend to order any more scans since I've made it to the five year mark. In his opinion, continually exposing me to radiation outweighs the benefit of getting another set of clean scans. He mentioned that if anything appears to change, I am always welcome to call, and I should continue to do self-exams on my right testicle.

Realizing that this might be the last time I ever saw him in a clinical setting, I made sure to thank him for all he's done over the past few years. From the beginning, he has always been a source of comfort and confidence. Not only was he the one who physically saved my life, he helped me to realize that I needed to take care of my mental health, with one simple question…"Justin, how are you really doing?"

Dr. Maurer, in addition to the entire staff at HOAF, treated me as a person first and a cancer patient/survivor second. I cannot say enough positive things about them and they are truly the gold standard for care. I wish that every cancer center could be as phenomenal as them. It is what every cancer survivor truly deserves.

Parallels from the beginning

My first thought was that since I did this scan a little earlier than normal, I'll need to come up with another post to write in December. But while I was writing this recap, deeper reflections popped up.

I couldn't help but notice a few parallels from the beginning of my cancer journey and now. For example, I put off going to the doctor when I first felt a lump since I was waiting for my new insurance to take effect. In 2021, I had this scan early, as I was trying to fit it in before my current coverage expired.

Back in October 2016, I was wheeled into the first (of many) scans, due to recovering from my orchiectomy. This week, I used a wheelchair for my last scan (although I didn't have another ball removed this time). As I wax poetically here, I think of these similarities as bookends from the beginning and end of the "Era of Scans," as I now have termed these past five year.

My final thoughts

My cancer journey will never truly be over, but it feels like another chapter is closing. I closed the book on treatment a few years ago, and now I'm turning the page on active surveillance. As this next storyline unfolds, I've left with a bit of a bittersweet feeling (and not just from the book metaphors I'm forcing here).

While the scans were more of a formality at this point, I knew I could always count on having reassurance at least once a year that I was cancer free. I fully trust Dr. Maurer's decision to not have future scans, but part of me feels like now I will be flying blind and having to rely on being vigilant with any changes in my body. Perhaps it's a dramatic notion, but I feel like a safety net has been removed.

Nevertheless, I know I have plenty of support from my loved ones and can always reach out to HOAF if I need to. Being a cancer survivor has come with a host of ups and downs, and despite some apprehension of not having annual scans anymore, I will count this clean five year scan as a major win.

This post originally appeared on A Ballsy Sense of Tumor on August 21, 2021. It is republished with permission.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.cancerhealth.com/blog/fiveyear-scan-end-era