

Kelly McWhinney's Melanoma Journey of Perseverance and Perspective

Once a fan of tanning beds, Kelly McWhinney now raises awareness of the true dangers of melanoma, a type of skin cancer.

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In March of 2022, Kelly McWhinney was a busy mother to her one and two-year-old daughters Mia and Blakely. Life was as hectic as expected for the 27-year-old, but when she noticed that a mole on her back was suddenly changing, she decided to call her dermatologist. The following visit to the dermatologist would mark the beginning of a long and challenging journey for Kelly and her family.

A History of Tanning and an Early Stage Diagnosis

The concerning mole on Kelly's back was growing, misshapen, and multicolored. "All of the [ABCDEs of melanoma](#) were happening right there in front of me," remarked Kelly. Most of her adult life, Kelly was good about going to the dermatologist. But like many women, she started tanning in middle school. Her habit only got worse as she became a cheerleader in college, where her team was sponsored by a local tanning salon and the girls were offered free, unlimited tanning and were frequently encouraged to take advantage of the offer. This personal history of UV exposure made her at higher risk of melanoma and was the reason why she stayed on top of her annual visits to the dermatologist for so many years.

However, during the COVID-19 pandemic and whilst becoming a mom, Kelly's visits to the dermatologist became infrequent. When she was eventually seen for the evolving mole in 2022, her dermatologist performed a biopsy. Six days later, her dermatologist called with news: the mole was [Stage 1B melanoma](#).

Shortly after her diagnosis, Kelly underwent a [Wide Local Excision \(WLE\)](#) to remove the melanoma. Despite a large scar across her shoulder and challenging recovery while still caring for her two active children, Kelly was told that all margins were clear, and she felt she was safe. "At the time I wasn't very informed on melanoma or how serious it could be," said Kelly. "I assumed that I was in the clear after surgery and was ready to move on with my life."

A Shocking Melanoma Recurrence

In the year following her diagnosis, Kelly visited her dermatologist every three months, and had a few pre-cancerous moles removed. One day, shortly after a visit to her dermatologist, she woke up with a shooting pain between her armpit and breast. She initially visited her primary care doctor, who believed the pain was related to breastfeeding and prescribed her antibiotics.

However, Kelly grew more concerned when the pain persisted. “I know my body better than anyone, and I knew something was not right,” she said. She insisted on further examinations and received a mammogram and ultrasound. While the mammogram came up normal, the ultrasound found an enlarged lymph node. The following week, a biopsy of the node revealed that after just one year, Kelly’s melanoma had returned.

While the news was shocking, Kelly knew she had to jump into action: “my life was on the line.” She quickly reached out to her cousin, Dr. Katie Pettit, who is the head of the emergency department at an Indianapolis hospital. Her cousin was able to help Kelly find an oncologist at Indiana University Health Simon Comprehensive Cancer Center, about an hour’s drive away.

Managing Side Effects from Immunotherapy Treatment

Nine days after finding out her melanoma returned, Kelly met with her oncologist Dr. Ted Logan for the first time with her husband Tim by her side. “I was in survival mode, and my head was spinning with questions,” recalled Kelly. “Tim was a second set of eyes and ears at my appointment.” Oftentimes it is helpful for patients to have a loved one or [caregiver attend their appointments](#) to help record information and communicate with their care team.

Dr. Logan’s first recommendation was for Kelly to get a PET scan to see if her melanoma had spread to any distant organs, which they determined it had not. Next, she underwent a [Complete Lymph Node Dissection](#) of the nodes in her left armpit. Nineteen lymph nodes were removed, and it was determined that there was no cancer in any additional nodes — aside from the initial one found on the ultrasound — confirming her melanoma stage as [3B](#).

A month after recovering from her surgery, Kelly began [immunotherapy treatment](#) in June of 2023. Her care team put her on a schedule of infusions every two weeks for a year, however after just three infusions she developed several side effects and had to pause treatment. Side effects of immunotherapy can be mild, moderate, or even life-threatening, and a patient’s care team may recommend pausing immunotherapy to treat side effects to prevent them from becoming more severe.

For Kelly, her thyroid hormone levels were fluctuating from one extreme to another, and she needed to be seen by an endocrinologist. While being treated for her thyroid issues, her endocrinologist, Dr. Qasim Iqbal, delivered the shocking news that she had developed Type 1 diabetes from her immunotherapy treatment. “This news was a true game changer for me. I had

to make immediate and drastic changes to my lifestyle,” said Kelly. In addition, Kelly was experiencing migraines, nausea, exhaustion, and developed Sjogren’s Syndrome - an autoimmune disease that causes dryness of the mouth, eyes and other parts of the body.

After six long weeks of treating her side effects, some of which will remain for her entire life, Kelly was finally able to restart immunotherapy treatment in September 2023. Today, Kelly’s scans show No Evidence of Disease (NED) while she continues to finish out her treatment cycle. To stay on top of her care, Kelly sees her oncologist once a month, her dermatologist every three months, and her endocrinologist every month.

Focusing on the Positives

One of the most challenging aspects of Kelly’s journey has been navigating the unknown. From her initial diagnosis to her recurrence, and the various treatments and side effects, each step has brought its own set of challenges. Despite any struggles, Kelly has remained positive and most importantly focused on making sure her daughters have a normal life through it all. “I feel incredibly blessed,” she said, “because our family and friends have been an amazing support system.” Kelly shared that her husband has missed very few appointments, and if he is unable to make it, her parents or sister will go. Her mom and sister have also stepped up in more ways than one, especially to help with the kids.

Kelly also considers herself lucky for the connections and relationships she has made through the melanoma community: “I have built some of the most genuine friendships through my diagnosis.” She credits those friendships and the melanoma community as a whole for helping her shift her energy and focus into more positive avenues.

Recently, some of her focus has been on advocacy and awareness. She decided to publicly share her story, especially as a former tanning bed user, to spread awareness of the dangers of indoor tanning and the importance of [regular skin checks](#). By sharing her story on social media and participating in community events like [MRA’s Melanoma > Exchange Patient Forum](#) and local melanoma runs/walks, Kelly hopes to inspire others to take their skin health seriously and encourage them to be diligent in advocating for themselves within the health care system. “This cancer is minimized, but the true dangers of it have to be brought to life,” she shared. “More people need to yell about melanoma, and I want to be a voice to do that.”

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