

A Life-Changing Diagnosis: Leah Koskinen's Melanoma Journey

Diagnosed with Stage III skin cancer as a young mom, Leah Koskinen is now a melanoma advocate and sunscreen promoter.

March 11, 2026 By [Melanoma Research Alliance](#)

By Renee Orcione, Associate Director, Communications and Engagement, Melanoma Research Alliance

Leah Koskinen was in her early twenties and a new mom to her toddler son when she scheduled her first ever [skin exam with a dermatologist](#) in 2018. She was concerned with a dark spot on her shoulder, which her dermatologist biopsied. Leah recalled the lesion “looking more like a dark skin tag than a typical melanoma that follows the [ABCDEs](#),” but her dermatologist told her not to worry. Just a week later, however, she received a call with the news that she had melanoma.

Soon after her diagnosis, Leah underwent a [sentinel lymph node biopsy \(SLNB\)](#) and [wide local excision surgery](#) at the University of Michigan to remove and determine the staging of her melanoma. The melanoma had unfortunately spread to a lymph node that was removed, confirming her diagnosis as [Stage 3](#).

“Everything felt like it was moving so fast at that point,” said Leah. She was given the choice to either undergo further surgery and begin an [adjuvant](#) immunotherapy regimen or plan for careful monitoring with regular scans and skin checks. Reflecting on this moment, Leah admitted she didn’t fully grasp the severity of her diagnosis at first.

“I knew nothing about melanoma, so it didn’t even cross my mind that it could be something serious.”

Navigating Melanoma Treatment and Family Planning

For Leah, her diagnosis was a turning point that reshaped her perspective on health, life, and family. Following surgery, she was presented with two paths forward: begin [adjuvant](#) immunotherapy or closely monitor her disease. Regardless of which option she chose, the tumor board at her hospital unanimously recommended that Leah and her husband wait five years without recurrence before trying to have another child – a large deviation from the plans they had made for their family.

Leah ultimately chose a path of careful monitoring. “That was probably as hard as finding out about the initial diagnosis,” Leah shared. “You’ve already had your world rocked once, and then you’re being told you can’t grow your family.”

After three and a half years of clear scans and skin checks, Leah and her husband ultimately made the decision to move forward with growing their family. Soon, Leah was pregnant with her second child, a daughter. Despite the happy news, this period was filled with uncertainty, difficult conversations, and lingering anxieties of recurrence. A hospital social worker helped Leah and her husband navigate unspoken fears. “Those are really hard conversations to have during a time that should be happy,” she recalled, “but that was the reality of where we were at.” That concern followed Leah through her delivery, when doctors sent her placenta to the lab immediately after birth to test for melanoma cells. The results, thankfully, were clear.

Turning a Melanoma Diagnosis Into Advocacy

At first, Leah’s cancer experience left her feeling isolated. “I felt like the only person on the planet who was a young mom going through cancer,” she said. But after the birth of her daughter, she began intentionally seeking and building connections within the melanoma community. She launched an [Instagram account](#) to share her journey and perspective as a mom and attended MRA’s [Melanoma > Exchange Patient Forum](#). “Being able to connect with more women who have been through what I’ve been through has been the biggest blessing,” said Leah. “I really think it has healed a part of my heart.”

As Leah became more confident as an advocate, she had a growing desire to make a direct impact in her local community. She had the opportunity to share her story and partner with a local dermatology office who was offering free skin checks for firefighters – a group at higher risk of melanoma due to various occupational hazards. This opportunity evolved into an even greater purpose for Leah: today, she continues this outreach and is working to make sunscreen more accessible by having it readily available in firetrucks. Leah has also made it her mission to provide permanent shade at local schools and has begun advocating at the state level.

Nearly eight years after her initial diagnosis, Leah continues her regular skin checks and yearly scans, balancing her roles as a mother, advocate, and survivor.

“There’s life before cancer, and there’s a different life after cancer,” Leah reflected. “You can’t go back to how things used to be, but you can choose how you move forward.”

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