

Sun Safety Spotlight: Dawn Stringer's Early-Stage Melanoma Diagnosis

After successful surgery to remove the melanoma, Dawn Stringer educates others about sun safety and skin cancer awareness.

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By Renee Orcione, MRA Digital Engagement & Communications Manager

Being a child of the '90s, Dawn Stringer didn't prioritize sun safety. "I remember always having pink shoulders," said Dawn of growing up in sunny Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. Whether from the sun or from tanning beds, having a tan seemed essential. That's because she spent her childhood, teen years, and young adulthood on stage for dance, theater, and beauty pageants.

"Having a tan was a beauty standard at the time, especially if you were on stage," explained Dawn, now in her early 30s. "I always felt more attractive when I had a tan." To keep up with this beauty standard, Dawn started using tanning beds in her teens. She continued her tanning habit throughout college while working at a tanning salon, and into adulthood, completely turning a blind eye to the true dangers it posed.

Studies have shown that indoor tanning, especially at an early age, can increase one's risk of developing melanoma. A tan is also an indicator of skin cells in distress. According to the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), "A suntan does not indicate good health. When UV rays reach the skin's inner layer, the skin makes more melanin. Melanin is the pigment that gives skin its color. It moves toward the outer layers of the skin and becomes visible as a tan. Any change in skin color after UV exposure (whether it is a tan or a burn) is a sign of injury, not health."

An Unusual Spot

In her early 20s, Dawn decided to stop competing in pageants to focus on establishing a career in journalism and communications. In the years following she moved to Texas, got married, and had two children. Still, Dawn's inherent desire to connect with people and her pull towards the stage lingered. She decided to get back into the pageant scene, where she most recently competed in Mrs. Texas America in April 2024.

While in the midst of preparing for the pageant, Dawn decided to address an odd-looking spot on her thigh that she'd kept an eye on for more than five years. "I've always had a lot of freckles, but something about this one stood out to me," recalled Dawn. "I'm so glad I trusted my gut because it really paid off."

Dawn wasn't entirely sure if the spot was something to be concerned about, but she did notice that the shape was irregular and that the coloring was splotchy. For years she had a gut feeling something wasn't right. These unusual features — some of the [tell-tale signs of melanoma](#) — compelled her to make her first-ever appointment with a dermatologist.

Receiving a Melanoma Diagnosis

While at her appointment, Dawn's dermatologist agreed that the spot on her leg was suspicious and decided to take a biopsy. Within a couple of days, she received a call confirming her worst-case scenario: the spot was melanoma. Dawn grappled with her diagnosis, "the worst thing that could happen, happened — and it was because of how I treated my skin."

By the next week, Dawn underwent [surgery to remove her melanoma](#). When caught early, melanoma is highly curable, and prompt treatment is important to ensure the best possible outcome.

Dawn's initial concern following her diagnosis was for her family and how they might be impacted. Luckily, her melanoma was caught early enough that all traces of it were successfully removed with surgery. Even so, she had to navigate healing from a large incision on her thigh while being a present mom to her two active young children.

Dawn was also still preparing for her upcoming pageant, which included a swimsuit competition that would expose her scar to a large audience of judges, peers, family and friends, and strangers. "I am luckily at a place in my life where I am confident in who I am, and having a visible scar doesn't affect me like it might have years ago," said Dawn.

Important Sun Safety and Early Detection Conversations

During the Mrs. Texas America pageant, Dawn's scar became a conversation starter, especially because many of the other contestants had similar sun-safety habits when it came to tanning. They were also shocked to learn that Dawn's melanoma could have been easily mistaken for a regular freckle.

Dawn took the opportunity to share what she learned in the prior weeks about [sun safety](#) and [early detection](#) with her fellow pageant contestants.

“I am happy to be a cautionary tale if it means that more people will understand the seriousness of melanoma and the importance of sun safety” she said.

It has become especially important to Dawn that her experience and new sun safe habits teach and encourage her children and young nieces and nephews to adopt the same habits. “I am more motivated than ever to teach my kids these healthy habits. I know they will thank me later,” said Dawn.

According to [UCSF Benioff Children’s Hospital](#), children are particularly vulnerable to damage from UV rays because their skin is delicate, thinner, and produces less melanin. Just one bad sunburn in childhood or adolescence doubles a child’s chances of developing melanoma later in life, so starting sun protection early on is critical.

Leaning on the Melanoma Community

The value of community is another takeaway of Dawn’s from her melanoma diagnosis. Shortly after her surgery, Dawn took part in a Melanoma Story Swap hosted by MRA during Melanoma Awareness Month. There she connected with other melanoma patient advocates who shared advice for navigating a diagnosis, treatment, follow-up care, mental health, and more.

“Connecting with the melanoma community has been an inspiration. I encourage anyone who is thinking about reaching out to an advocacy group to do it,” exclaimed Dawn. “You’ll find resources, support, and a lot to be learned about this disease. There is no manual for going through a melanoma diagnosis, but we can’t let the negative parts define us.”

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