



My life was turned upside down in April 2016. Until then I was living in a happy bubble, I was newly married and my husband and I had a beautiful one year little daughter. Life was great until I received a phone-call in work one Tuesday to tell me that the results of my recent mole removal were back and that I had cancer, malignant melanoma to be precise.

I had a mole on my upper right arm that had started to change when I was pregnant. I mentioned it to my doctor and he assured me it was nothing to worry about but almost a year later eventually agreed to refer me for removal as it was 'unsightly'. I had my mole removal surgery in April and although I was worried about it I managed to put it out of my head until I received the phone call from the hospital to tell me the bad news. I remember that phone call so clearly, I don't think I'll ever forget it. I had to phone my husband and my parents to tell them and they reacted exactly as you would expect – everyone was upset. Not me though, I remained incredibly calm. Eerily calm in fact. I know now that my reaction was actually shock and the calmness would not last long.

Our next step was to be referred to my surgeon who informed me that I would need a further surgery called a WLE (Wide Local Excision) and also a SNB (Sentinel Node Biopsy) to see if the melanoma had spread to my lymph nodes. In the meantime I was to have an MRI on my brain and a CT scan to verify it had not spread to any other organs. Thankfully the MRI came back clear immediately but the CT showed up some abnormalities on my liver so I needed an ultrasound to investigate further. That night was the worst of my life. I stupidly googled 'cancer of the liver' and panicked when I saw the results returned to me. The calm I had been feeling certainly left me that night and I was a mess. Fortunately the ultrasound results were clear. The relief was overwhelming. I cried, my husband cried, even the doctor performing the ultrasound cried. I guess nobody ever wants to tell a 31 year old that they have cancer on their liver.

Unfortunately the relief did not last long as the biopsy results were back and confirmed that the melanoma had spread to my lymph nodes. I would need to undergo a further surgery to remove all remaining lymph nodes in my arm followed by 1 year of adjuvant interferon - a form of chemotherapy and a very toxic drug treatment with an extremely low success rate. There are very few options for stage 3 melanoma patients such as myself in Ireland – 'adjuvant interferon' and 'watch and wait' being the only two. I agonised over my decision but eventually decided that doing something was better than doing nothing and I started my year of interferon in August 2016. It was without doubt the toughest time of my life and it impacted everyone close to me. I barely had the energy to even lift my baby so my mother moved in with us for the duration of treatment to help out. I lasted 6 months on Interferon before being taken off it by my oncologist as the side effects were so severe that I had absolutely no quality of life. I was terrified when he took me off the treatment and struggled with it for a while. I felt as though I was losing control of the situation – that I was almost like a 'sitting duck' waiting for the cancer to return whereas when I was on treatment I was

actively doing something to prevent it from returning. I didn't have a choice though, my oncologist had spoken and his word was final.

Because I am so high risk for reoccurrence, estimated at up to 70% when you are a stage 3 sufferer as I am, I get scanned and examined every 3 months. I feel like I live my life in 3 month intervals, living only from scan to scan and hoping and praying that I'll be one of the lucky ones that doesn't suffer a relapse. Thankfully, I'm now here almost a year and a half since my initial diagnosis and for the most part life has pretty much returned to normal. Or as normal as life as a cancer patient can ever be. You are never the same after you hear those awful words 'You have cancer' but I try to remain optimistic and believe that everything happens for a reason and perhaps someday I'll find out what the reason was. And in the meantime I'll try to spread awareness and give support and comfort to those who need it, in the same way as it was provided to me by members of the Melanoma Support Ireland group when I was first diagnosed.

Niamh x