

# Erin Welsh

## A melanoma survivor's story

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It's not that I didn't enjoy being fair but, just as those with straight hair want curly hair, I wanted a tan. By my teen years I was often lying in the sun and at 17 I walked into a tanning salon for the first time.

By 21 I was using tanning beds up to five times a week. Hearing things like, "you look better with a tan," or "you look sickly, you need a healthy glow!" still impacted me. I felt *ugly* without colour.

Sometime around the age of 24, I met a guy who didn't like the whole "fake and bake" thing. I had also moved back home and was in school and couldn't really afford the luxury. For the first time I started to think, "Did I do too much damage to my skin? What if I get cancer?" I decided to live without the beds.

Around August of 2010, I noticed a weird mole on my right rear calf that I finally had removed December 9th. A week later I woke up to the sound of my phone ringing. It was just before my alarm sounded and I answered with an annoyed "hello." It was the doctor.

"Erin, I have some serious results to speak to you about, could you please come down to my office?" I got that sinking feeling in my gut. I said, "Well, I have to go to work, I can't meet until later but..." He told me to grab a pen.

I wrote two words: malignant melanoma.

My ears were ringing. I was hardly able to scrawl down the information: scans the next day, stuff about follow up, surgery. I went to work. I was still reeling from the shock of those words. *malignant...* cancer. I have cancer.

I had two ultrasounds and a chest x-ray. Clear of metastases. Relief. I relaxed; all I had to do was get this quick little skin removal surgery and I was all done.

I had my first surgeries in early February 2011. One to remove the margins around the malignant mole and one to remove a lymph node to make sure the cancer hadn't spread. It wasn't too bad, I was back at work a few days later. But I now had a new worry – what would they find in the node they removed?

The day before Valentines day I went to the surgeon's office to deal with a complication from my surgery (a buildup of lymphatic fluid). My surgeon was out of town so a man I didn't know drained the fluid and then broke the news to me quite casually:

"They found a bit of cancer in your sentinel node. That would bring your cancer to stage 3a. I assume your surgeon will want to take out more lymph nodes, quite a huge undertaking (an understatement to say the least)." There was that ringing in my ears again. I said "thank you" and left.

I had stage 3 cancer, I was facing my own mortality, and I thought "Why? I am only 27. Not fair.

Not fair. I did this to myself!" I soon realized, however, that whatever I had done to cause this I had to fight now.

On March 9, 2011 I had my "radical groin dissection." I woke up in the recovery room feeling like someone tried to cut off my leg. The four days in the hospital after the surgery are mostly a blur. I went home to recover. Four weeks with two large tubes and heavy balls jutting from my body for drainage. It was a very hard time and dreams about wild animals in the forest wouldn't stop. I feared my disease and I felt so weak I didn't know if I could face it.

The day my tubes were removed my surgeon gave me good news - the cancer had not spread to any additional lymph nodes. I cried with joy – one battle was won.

A few weeks later I began the hardest battle of the war – interferon treatment, a biological treatment for stage 3 melanoma patients that is administered for A YEAR.

First, you get five days a week with intravenous drips at your local cancer hospital, and if it hasn't hit you yet that you have a serious disease, it will then. I became a shell of my former self with "fun" side effects like severe itching, as though I had bugs beneath my skin and hair loss. This is when you know you are a cancer patient and you are nothing but the sickness.

Three months into my treatment I realized this happened to me for a reason. I want little girls to understand that their skin is most beautiful when it's their natural colour. A burn can kill you and tanning beds are like coffins. You are not facing danger later, when you're older and have had your life, you are facing danger *now*.

Here I am today, a little over a year after the last day of my treatment, and I am back to being a "normal" 29 year old, with no evidence of any melanoma. I am thankful every day I wake up. Though my surgeries did alter the function of my right leg and hip, and I do get pain, it doesn't even faze me. I get to have my 30th birthday this year. I get to grow older. A real gift to me!