

Hilary's Carcinoid Journey: Never Take a Breath of Air for Granted

Four years ago I came down with a cough that I just couldn't shake. I was a single mother of a son which was a senior and just kept pushing ahead instead of going to the doctor. Having no insurance did not help the situation either.



The cough was getting worse and I noticed a shortness of breath; others would say it sounded as if I had "whooping cough." After three months of slowly getting worse I had to make a trip to the emergency room. I was released the same day, after receiving fluids and getting a steroid shot, breathing treatment, antibiotic shot, and chest X-rays. I seemed to have pneumonia.

For the next four days I literally stayed in bed, took my medicine, and tried to recover. I went back to work as a bartender thinking I was feeling a little better. The cough just wouldn't clear up. I thought it was from being around secondhand smoke so I endured. Within months I could tell it was getting worse, but still I pushed forward.

After dealing with the cough for several months I started having a flushing feeling in my face from time to time, along with shortness of breath. Insurance or no insurance I had to do something. I went to the doctor and was diagnosed with bronchitis. I took another round of antibiotics, cough syrup, and rested. I felt a little better but I still had to cough and shortness of breath. A couple more months passed and it was even worse, so again I was at the doctor, again I was given antibiotics and cough syrup. This went on for about eight months, and I was sent to a pulmonary doctor who after what seemed like a hundred tests came to the conclusion I had COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease) and asthma. I was only 42 and had never smoked a cigarette in my life, so I was very shocked. However it was something I could treat and get better, or so I thought.

For a year I was treated for COPD and asthma but it was steadily getting worse. I would end up in the emergency room every three months with bronchitis or pneumonia. I couldn't even make it to my mailbox and back without having to stop and catch my breath. Halfway into this I felt a sensation as if I had a blockage in my airways. I mentioned this to every doctor who I saw within the year. All said "with COPD and asthma that is a normal feeling." At times I really thought I was going crazy, just

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making it into more than it was.

Into the second year I was sent to see an allergy doctor, or as I like to refer to her, my saving grace. Dr. Benita Amin. After seeing her on two occasions she sent me for a CT scan of my head, neck, throat, and lungs. There it was -- a tumor blocking my trachea. I was relieved that I wasn't crazy, there was something blocking my airways, but scared as well. What if this was cancer, then what?

The following week I saw a surgeon who suggested we biopsy the tumor and from that point determine the next step. It took two weeks to get me into the operating room and another week to get the pathology report back. Three of the longest weeks of my life.

By the way getting on the Internet looking up trachea tumors only made it worse. Once in the operating room my surgeon removed the tumor instead of taking just a biopsy. The tumor was blocking 80% of my airway. The tumor itself was in the trachea where it branches off to the lungs, which seemed to be growing from a stem-like projection. The stem was cut as close to the trachea wall as possible, removing the tumor.

I woke up to a feeling I hadn't had in a very long time. I was able to breathe, and it was a wonderful feeling. Pathology reports confirmed it was cancer, carcinoid cancer. My surgeon consulted a panel of cancer doctors and the majority said I should have trachea resectioning. Due to the tumor being so close to my heart radiation was out of the question unless it was a have to, and this cancer does not respond to chemo alone. No place in my area would do this type of surgery, so it looked as if I would be heading out of state to Birmingham, Alabama. I was told this cancer was a very slow-growing cancer and was atypical which probably would not spread. I was wondering if this drastic measure was needed. My surgeon consulted with several more cancer specialists who thought I could probably watch it for the next five years or so with biopsies being done before making that trip.

First year I had a bronchoscopy every 3 months along with a biopsy, second year every 6 months. So far so good! I am starting the 3rd year and will be going in every year now. I will never take a breath of air for granted in my life.

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