

Carol Johnson



My journey with cancer started in the summer of 1998 when I was 44 years old. My son was entering his senior year of high school and my twin girls were going into the 6th grade. Through a self breast exam, I discovered a lump in my breast. Shortly after the cancer was diagnosed, I had a lumpectomy. I then received several months of chemotherapy followed by 30 radiation treatments and an additional 2 months of chemotherapy. My options for this type of therapy were pretty limited, considering my lengthy family history of cancer on my mother's side of the family. I tolerated my treatments well enough to be able to maintain my daily activities and attend my children's events, as that was a very important part of my life. I am, after all, their biggest (and loudest) fan!

I got along fine for 4 years and was then diagnosed with a rare type of cancer, called Multiple Myeloma, in November of 2002 at the age of 49. This was a rather rare cancer 7 years ago, but more and more people are being diagnosed every year as doctors learn more about the disease. Multiple Myeloma is a cancer of the plasma cells in the bone marrow. Our body uses plasma cells to help fight diseases by producing antibodies. In Multiple Myeloma, these plasma cells grow uncontrollably in the bone marrow and they actually form into tumors in the bones. As these tumors grow it makes it harder for the bone marrow to create good cells, like red and white blood cells and platelets. When the body can't create these 'good' cells, it can cause anemia and people are more likely to develop infections. The bone tumors also cause bone pain and possibly

fractures. When I was diagnosed, I had 7 fractures in my spine. I had been doing a lot of yard work and was working in the shelter belt and pulling large fireweeds. I developed a back ache that wouldn't go away. During this month of back aches, I also developed a cough that I couldn't get rid of. After a long month of these symptoms, a bone marrow biopsy revealed Multiple Myeloma. By the time the cancer was discovered 75% of my plasma cells were affected. I went on a regimen of Dexamethasone for 4 months and when that drug became ineffective I proceeded with a stem cell transplant.

I collected my own stem cells through a unique procedure called apheresis, which is similar to kidney dialysis. I was then treated with chemotherapy that killed off my entire immune system. After the chemotherapy regimen was complete, the stem cells were infused back into my body and I patiently waited for them to engraft and start reproducing red and white blood cells and platelets. This whole process included a 3 month stay at Mayo Clinic in Rochester, MN. I responded well to the treatment and was in remission for about 6 ½ years. The cancer returned the summer of 2009 but this time the gene was mutated, which made it more difficult to diagnose and treat. This time my plasma cells were 85% compromised. I was first treated with an oral chemotherapy called Revlamid. I had a great response and it held the cancer in check for 6 months. Just like that, the drug stopped working and the cancer was back in full force. I decided to have a second stem cell transplant in January of 2010. After that I was put on a maintenance chemotherapy of Velcade. I received this once every 2 weeks and took it for about 1 year. I went back to Mayo Clinic for my yearly checkup in January of 2011 and the blood work showed some problems. Another bone marrow biopsy showed that I was again out of remission. I had no real symptoms, so this was quite a shock. I continued on the same chemo, only at a much higher dose. I went through 2 ½ months on this drug and did not tolerate it well. During this 2 ½ months, my children researched homeopathic supplements for MM. They found a supplement called curcumin, which I started taking in February. Since taking this supplement, I have seen a significant reduction in the compromised plasma cells in my bone marrow. I am now back to a maintenance dose of the chemo again and hoping to maintain at this level.

I'm now just enjoying every day with family and friends and also planning my daughter's wedding. I wouldn't be where I am right now if it weren't for my son, Aaron, and his dedicated research to helping me get better, my two daughters, Ashley & Allison, for being my very own personal caretakers and my sisters, Jerilyn & Joyce, for helping my children carry this load. I feel like God has truly blessed me with strength to keep battling the obstacles He has put in front of me, and my family and friends to keep me motivated.