

SURVIVORSHIP STORY: LANCE ARMSTRONG

LANCE IS A TESTICULAR CANCER SURVIVOR.

Whenever I go in for checkups, obviously those are nervous days. In the first year, I was getting checked every month, so I think it was just a constant month of fear until I went to the next checkup. In year two and year three, that started to fade, and now I really don't get nervous about the checkups anymore. I don't know if that's a good or bad thing, but I think it's the truth.

We as cancer survivors depend on our doctors and nurses and the people in the hospital, then there's this huge extended network of friends and family and neighbors and teammates. These are the people that care about you and are involved in your life but, for me, I really depended on the doctors. When I finally decided to end up in Indianapolis, I just turned over everything to them. It's like turning over your life to somebody, so if they said things were going good, then I believed that. If they said things were not so good, I would have believed that, too.

You should certainly be involved. You should certainly ask hard questions. And some of those questions might make you uncomfortable. To look at somebody that you've trusted for, you know, just a week or two weeks and to say, "Look, I'm not sure this is the right thing. I want a second opinion. So I need to get all my records, I need to get all my Xrays, all my blood work, everything, collect it, and go somewhere else." It's not easy to do and you're worried that they're going to be offended, but you're talking about what's in the best interest for your life and you've got to do it. You've got to make the call to search for the best and the most advanced care.

The nurses are the ones who, in my opinion, do most of the work. The doctors obviously design the protocol, design the treatment and oversee it, but the nurses are the ones who are in the hospital wing or in the chemo room. They are the ones you see 90 percent of the time, and they're the ones that you get to talk to and the ones you have to ask questions to. They're the ones that make everything happen. My nurse Latrice, at the time, she was the boss. She was the one I really relied on, and if I had questions, if I just wanted to talk, I'd turn to Latrice.

I finished in December of '96 and I continued to call the doctors for months after that. If I was worried or if I just needed a little pep talk, I would call Dr. Nichols and bug him a little bit. I think they thought that I bugged them when I was being treated, but I really bugged them when I was done!

Hope can come from many ways. Certain people are very religious, so they find a lot of hope in religion or a belief that they have. Others can have hope in themselves, hope in the process, in the treatment, in the drugs, in the history that has come before them in proving that people can live and survive and thrive.

Hope can come in the form of just thinking that it could be a lot worse. I was in a position where it was bad for me, but I was sure that there was somebody out there that was worse off than I was. To me, that gave me hope that I wasn't in the group that they said, "You don't have that chance. You're not going to make it. We can treat you, we can prolong your life, but you're probably not going to live. We're 99.9 percent sure you're not going to live." I could not imagine being put in that place.

So if they tell me that I have a 40 or 50 percent chance to live, then I'd turn around and say, "Well, that's okay. At least they didn't tell me I had a 4 or 5 percent chance to live." So already I am a lot further ahead than I could be. It sounds strange to think that that gave me hope, but I just felt optimistic that my life was not already predetermined to be short.

When you're fighting cancer there are no guarantees. I focused on getting better and I tried to say positive almost all the time that I was going to ultimately get better. But there are moments where you say, "Okay, this might not shake out and I might die from this." At the same time, now that I've made it through, I think that's a helpful thing to experience.

I'm sure that cancer will affect my life in some other way. For me to think, well, I got the disease when I was 25 so I'm going to cruise through life from now on and nobody I know or love is going to get this illness — that's silly. I'm not so sure that at some point in my life I won't get another form of cancer or have some other effects, either secondary cancer due to treatment or due to some process here. I'm quite confident that I won't get testicular cancer again or won't have a relapse, but when I'm 50 or 60 will I get prostate cancer? I don't know. I might. But I'll catch it early, I'm sure of that.

When you're diagnosed, I think everything changes. If you're a smoker, you stop smoking. If you've eaten poorly in the past, you try to improve your diet. If you drank a bunch of beer before, you try to stop. It's a serious wake-up call for most people, so in that sense it's a good thing.

I try to maintain a healthier lifestyle than I did before. I'm not of that camp that thinks I got sick because of a poor lifestyle or poor diet, so my situation is a little more random. I don't think it's because I ate a cheeseburger five times a year. But certainly it's good for people to wake up and understand that this is our shot and everything we do and everything we put in our body ultimately has some effect. Whether it's through diet or through fitness or through other lifestyle things, it's a good thing to change, a good thing to always look at.

I try not to take the risks that I feel are very risky, but at the same time I try to find the risks that are just below there. And I love to take those and I think those are great for pushing the envelope a little or just reminding yourself that you're alive. Fear is good and being scared is good. I need that at times. Whether or not that's going downhill on a bike at 70 miles an hour, or jumping off a cliff, or riding a motorcycle — those are just fears that I think are healthy. But would I go smoke a cigarette? Never, because that's a risk that I don't ever need to take.

My priorities have changed. My passion is becoming stronger for my job. I believe that I've learned we have to be happy, and in order to be happy you have to be honest and truthful. And I can't get up every day and not be happy or not be straightforward. I think if your heart tells you something, you need to listen to it. That's a serious priority for me. Many people can look at my situation and say, "Well, look at you. You're perfectly healthy and fit and better than you were before. This thing actually improved you." But other people lose a lot. They lose part of their mind. They lose parts of their body. They lose the ability to function or to work professionally.

This is an illness that isn't always pretty and most of the time it's messy. Along the way there are certain things we can do, I think, to affect that and make our lives more productive. If I lost a leg through the illness, then I would be a disabled athlete. I would focus on something like that. I would focus on the things that I still loved. I may not be a professional athlete, but I'd still have my passion and I'd still know that I woke up every day. For me that's a powerful message and one that, as bad as it is, it could be a hell of a lot worse.

We're thankful and glad that people have come to learn and to listen and to share their experience. I've heard thousands of times, especially in the last year being on the President's Cancer Panel, of people just looking for a place to go. They just need one source for information, for stories, for companionship, for anything, to know that somebody cares and is listening. We hope we can provide that for them. As I said, life is messy and this illness is messy. We hope that, through the information and knowledge here, we could help people not only to survive, but to thrive. So that's our mission, that's our goal, and hopefully this works.

LIVESTRONG is exactly I guess what it says. It's one thing to live, but it's another thing to live strong, to attack the day and attack your life with a whole new attitude. This was a gift for me. I guess before the illness I just lived. Now, after the illness, I live strong.

I'm Lance Armstrong, and I'm a seven-year cancer survivor.