

## MY EXPERIENCE WITH THYROID CANCER

By Michelle

When I was 19 years old, a few weeks after orientation week at McGill University, I developed a bump on the left side of my neck, under my jaw that persisted following a typical throat infection. A neck ultrasound revealed a brachial cleft cyst, benign and treatable with surgery but it also revealed a small nodule with microcalcifications on my thyroid gland. At the time, the lesion didn't attract much attention and it simply needed to be monitored every few months. Fast forward 5 years later, a follow-up ultrasound showed that the nodule increased in size to 1 cm and my doctors recommended I have a biopsy to rule out cancer. Within a week, I received the results and was diagnosed with papillary thyroid cancer.

I remember sitting in the patient room with my dad being numbed by the news. How could this be happening to me, a young, healthy completely asymptomatic 24-year-old?! My only consolation at the time was hearing from the head and neck surgeon that papillary thyroid cancer was very slowly progressing and could be very easily treatable. Some actually referred to it as a "good cancer; the best cancer to have". I felt a bit reassured but still concerned, anxious and scared. One of the most challenging parts was breaking the news to my loved ones. Yet, it was only after a few days of talking about it with my family, sharing the news with a few of my close friends and educating myself on thyroid cancer that I began feeling more comfortable and accepting my diagnosis and treatment plan which was a total thyroidectomy.

I was very lucky that my surgery was only 6 weeks following my diagnosis. My feelings then were to get the surgery over with so that I could begin my recovery before the start of medical school. The surgery lasted 1 ½ hours and the surgeon was very pleased with the outcome. I spent the night in the hospital where my calcium levels were closely monitored to make sure that the parathyroid gland had not been affected during surgery. In that hospital bed, I remember feeling overjoyed that I was alive and essentially cured! I was so thankful that the



Post surgery

surgery was sufficient and that no further chemotherapy nor radiotherapy was required! I was extremely appreciative of my surgeon and of the entire healthcare system we have here in Quebec.

I've since had follow-up ultrasounds and regular checkups with my team of surgeons and my endocrinologist who carefully monitors and adjusts my Synthroid medication as needed. Luckily, I've been able to adjust quite easily to the new medication and have had no major symptoms or side effects.

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Today, I am almost one-year post-surgery, and I am doing very well. The scar on my neck healed very well and is barely noticeable (measures approximately 1 inch), I've completed the first 8 months of medical school, and am more active than I've been in a long time. When I reflect on this life-changing experience, I can honestly say that it has made me more aware of how fragile life is and how unexpected it can be. Acceptance is key but so is faith and trust that things will work out in the end. It has given me a new perspective of life – one where I cherish all that life has to offer, as much as possible. I will always remember the vulnerability and uncertainty that is inherent to being a patient as I've experienced it first-hand, and I trust the lessons learned throughout this experience will continue to guide me through life and my future practice as a physician.



*Right top: Michelle receiving her undergraduate degree in Kinesiology from McGill University.*



*Michelle with family pup, Bentley.*

*Michelle is currently completing her first year of medical school at McGill. We are pleased to have her join our Help Line Team assisting with French callers.*

*What's your story?*

Do you have a thyroid story you could share with us? Our readers find the experiences of others to be very helpful in their own struggle with thyroid disease. Please send your 500-1,000 word story and a couple of photos to: [info@thyroid.ca](mailto:info@thyroid.ca)

