



# One Woman's Story Highlights the Hidden Skin Cancer Risks for People of Color

**WHILE CAUCASIANS ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE DIAGNOSED WITH SKIN CANCER, ONLY 16 PERCENT OF CASES INVOLVE ADVANCED-STAGE CANCER. IN COMPARISON, 52 PERCENT OF AFRICAN-AMERICANS AND 26 PERCENT OF HISPANIC PATIENTS ARE DIAGNOSED WITH LATE-STAGE CASES.**

(Photo: Getty Images/Brand X Pictures)

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When Jacqueline Smith discovered an almond-sized lump on her bikini line, the concerned college senior went to her campus health center to find out what it could be.

There, she was told not to worry — it was simply an inflamed hair follicle. But Jacqueline couldn't shake the feeling that the firm, unmoving lump was something more serious. After graduation, she headed back home to Hackensack, N.J., and saw her family's primary care physician for a second opinion. He referred her to a surgical oncologist, who biopsied the site and had dire news: Jacqueline had skin cancer, a stage IIIC melanoma that had metastasized and was just a whisper shy of slipping into stage IV cancer.

A shocking diagnosis for anyone to handle, Jacqueline was especially incredulous: She was a young African-American woman with no family history of skin cancer, and she had never engaged in behaviors like tanning that studies show correlate with a higher risk.

"I was totally shocked by the diagnosis — my first thought was, 'Melanoma is the deadly skin cancer' — I never had a reason for it to be on my radar, and never thought I had to prevent it," Jacqueline tells Yahoo Health. "I had always heard melanoma was a risk for fair-skinned, middle-aged Caucasian women."



**JACQUELINE SMITH HAS SURVIVED TWO MELANOMA DIAGNOSES.** (Photo: Courtesy of Jacqueline Smith)

Jacqueline, who's now working as the regional assistant for New York Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, had the cancerous lymph nodes removed when she was just 21 years old. Young age and otherwise good health appeared to be on her side when subsequent scans showed no evidence of cancer, and doctors declared her clear to go on with life. Jacqueline excitedly began her first semester of a PhD program in sociology.

Then it happened again six years later, when she was 27 years old: Another lump emerged in the same area of her bikini line. Jacqueline visited the gynecologist at her university's health center, who said it was just an inflamed lymph node. "If it doesn't bother you, don't bother it," advised the physician.

This time, Jacqueline wasted no time in seeking a second opinion. A needle biopsy confirmed the dreaded: Stage III melanoma had returned. "Even though it was my second diagnosis, I was shocked all over again. My doctor told me, 'It will be a miracle if you survive another five years,'" shares Jacqueline.

### **THE HIDDEN SKIN CANCER RISKS FOR PEOPLE OF COLOR**

Perhaps even more surprising is that Jacqueline's case isn't an anomaly. While Caucasians are more likely to be diagnosed with skin cancer, only 16 percent of cases involve advanced-stage cancer. In comparison, 52 percent of African-Americans and 26 percent of Hispanic patients are diagnosed with late-stage cases, according to the Skin Cancer Foundation.

The initial site of Jacqueline's melanoma has never been determined. People of color are more likely to be diagnosed with melanoma in unusual areas like between the toes, under the nails, behind the ears, on the palms of hands and soles of feet, inside the lips, and between the buttock cheeks. Melanoma can even develop in the eyes, the lungs, the gastrointestinal tract, and the membrane known as the meninges that covers the brain and spinal cord.

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