

"I'm Happy I Did It" - How Elyse Doucette's Routine Screen May Have Saved Her Life

by Coral Paul

Let's be honest: not many people get excited about a pap smear.

It can be awkward, uncomfortable, and probably isn't anyone's idea of a "fun afternoon." But for Elyse Doucette, a routine pap smear – the most common screening tool used to detect cervical cancer – ended up being one of the most important appointments of her life.

While seven weeks pregnant, Elyse went to her doctor for a routine pap smear. She didn't think much of it. It was just another appointment during a time when she had plenty of other things on her mind.

Then, the results came back abnormal.

At first, Elyse didn't stress too much. She had heard from other people that they too had abnormal cells on their cervix while pregnant, that eventually went away on their own.

However, due to Elyse being considered a "high-risk" pregnancy, her doctor referred her to a specialist to monitor the cells by performing additional pap smears throughout her pregnancy.

After Elyse's daughter was born, the specialist completed more testing, which included another pap smear, a pelvic exam and a biopsy, and discussed the possibility of performing a LEEP procedure. A LEEP, short for loop electrosurgical excision procedure uses a loop of thin wire to remove

abnormal cell tissues from the cervix before they become cancerous.

"I remember the specialist calling me, saying he had the results of my biopsy," says Elyse. "He told me it was serious and that I needed to come see him."

The results from Elyse's biopsy and pelvic exam confirmed something she never expected: she had **cervical cancer**.

"I just remember bawling my eyes out," says Elyse. "I didn't think it could happen to me."

And in a way, she meant it. Life had been busy, especially with kids and a newborn. Looking back after the fact, Elyse realized there were signs she had brushed off at the time, like unusual discharge, painful sex, irregular periods, and sometimes very heavy bleeding. But in the moment, she didn't connect any of it to something serious. Like many community members, Elyse was just trying to get through the day.

Getting the diagnosis was overwhelming. Elyse had given birth a few months before and was dealing with the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual changes that can come after having a child. Now, she was also trying to understand what a cancer diagnosis meant for her future.

Eventually, Elyse was hit with more terrible news: she had to have a total hysterectomy due to the cancer's high risk of spreading. That meant



Elyse Doucette from Eskasoni Lnu'e'kati

removing her cervix and uterus. It also meant she would not be able to have more children. "I remember the doctor asking me if I was done having children," says Elyse. "In that moment I knew how serious it was."

When the reality of the hysterectomy set in, Elyse was devastated. "Knowing I'd never be able to have more children was a hard pill to swallow," she shares. "I cried for most of that day, overcome with sadness."

She struggled with the feeling that she had "lost her womanhood." But at the same time, she kept coming back to one thought. "I thought about my little ones at home who needed their mom to be strong for them. I knew I had to come to terms with it," says Elyse.

Today, Elyse looks back with a different kind of clarity.

Continued on next page...

She shares that she's grateful she went in for routine screening. She's grateful she followed up when the results came back abnormal. And she is most grateful that she is still here to raise her children. She got to watch her newborn grow. And now, that baby is 7 years old.

Don't Put Your Health Last

It's easy to put off your own care. There may be kids to raise, work to do, meals to make, and a million other tasks that feel more urgent.

But you and your health matter too.

Elyse wants other women, girls, or people with a cervix to know that cervical cancer can happen even when you least expect it. Regular screening can help find changes before they become cancer. Screening is for people who do not have symptoms. Symptoms can often appear when cervical cancer has progressed, which is why it's important not to wait for symptoms before getting screened.

If you are experiencing any of the following symptoms, contact your community Health Centre or healthcare provider as soon as possible:

- Abnormal vaginal bleeding (between periods, after menopause, or after sex)
- Abnormal or increased vaginal discharge
- Unusually heavy or long periods
- Pain during intercourse
- Pelvic pain

These symptoms can have many causes and do not necessarily mean you have cervical cancer, but they are worth checking out.

The right time to start screening for cervical cancer is different for everyone. Pap smears are recommended for people with a cervix who:

- Have been sexually active, regardless of their partner's gender
- Are between the ages of 25-70



It may not be the appointment you look forward to, but regular screening could help find changes early – before symptoms appear.

“Despite the challenges, I’m grateful for that initial pap smear,” says Elyse. “It led to the diagnosis, and catching the cancer early likely saved my life.”

Now she hopes her story helps someone else take that first step. “I want to share my story to encourage others to prioritize their health and get regular check-ups.”

A Note From Elyse:

Elyse thanks her family and friends, especially her partner, who stayed by her side through it all – the appointments, surgery, recovery, and the emotional ups and downs. There are no words to describe how grateful she is for that support, especially on the days she didn't have the words for what she was feeling.

Wela'liek Elyse: The Tajikeimik team sincerely thanks Elyse for sharing her story and allowing us to share it with others. Elyse, your experience reminds us of the importance of cancer screening. But it also reminds us that behind every diagnosis is a person with a family, a future, and people who love them. Talking openly about cancer, treatment and the experience of being screened takes courage, and we admire the strength, resilience and positivity you have shown. We also want to say, nothing about your diagnosis or treatment takes away from your identity, strength or worth as a woman. As reminded by Dr. Marie Ann Battiste in a 1989 article called Mi'kmaq Women: Their Special Dialogue, “Mi'kmaq women are the keepers of change.”

For cancer screening information and resources, scan the QR code or visit: www.mhwns.ca/resources/cancer-screening/



About Us

Tajikeimik is the new and developing health and wellness organization that is leading health transformation on behalf of Mi'kmaw communities in Nova Scotia. In collaboration with Chiefs, Grand Council, and Health Directors, Tajikeimik will build on and evolve the health and wellness services and programs used by Mi'kmaw people in Nova Scotia; improve health service delivery; and strengthen coordination with Federal and Provincial health system partners - with the goal of improving overall health for Mi'kmaq and communities.

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