

Shauna May, 44

Program manager, newlywed & self-confessed plant nerd with a history of stage three lobular breast cancer, **SUNSHINE COAST**

Shauna May, 44, Sunshine Coast is a program manager in the telco industry with a history of stage three lobular breast cancer.

In 2024, at the age of 42, Shauna noticed her right breast had become lumpier than usual. A mammogram came back clear, but a niggling feeling remained. Months later, when her nipple began to invert, she returned to her GP, who immediately arranged a contrast mammogram. Shauna was subsequently diagnosed with stage three lobular breast cancer – which starts in the milk-producing glands (lobules) and often spreads through the breast in thin strands rather than forming a solid lump, making it harder to detect on a standard mammogram.

The diagnosis came at a pivotal moment in Shauna's personal life, coinciding with her now-husband's 40th birthday, and the day before she was due to meet his family for the first time.

Following treatment, Shauna has since married her partner and returned to the Sunshine Coast after spending 20 years in Melbourne. Today, she is an advocate for breast cancer awareness and the Hologic Global Women's Health Index, calling for earlier detection, greater access to preventive healthcare, and for women to feel truly heard within the healthcare system.

This is Shauna's story.

Shauna recalls the months leading up to her diagnosis.



"I have lumpy, dense breasts. I chose to have a mammogram because my right breast felt lumpier than usual. It came back clear, but it kept niggling at me. My nipple started to invert, and in hindsight, I left it too long – work and life got busy.

"When I returned to my GP and asked for a reassessment, she immediately organised a contrast mammogram. I was then diagnosed with stage three lobular breast cancer, which was a shock, given it had been missed the first time around," said Shauna.

With no family history of breast cancer, the diagnosis came as a complete surprise to Shauna.

"I thought my partner may not want to stick around because of my diagnosis. But he did. We also had to make some big decisions about fertility and starting a family, on top of everything else," Shauna said.

Given her only symptom was an inverted nipple, Shauna believes early detection changed the course of her treatment.

"I had no other symptoms. I was otherwise well. But it was already stage three, and in my lymph nodes.

"I shudder to think what would have happened if I'd left it any longer, because my treatment ended up far more drastic and long-term than it needed to be," said Shauna.

"Had it been identified six months earlier, I might have been stage two and avoided the risk of lymphoedema. Even a mammogram wasn't a guarantee, and that uncertainty has made the mental game one of the hardest things I've faced."

The experience has changed how Shauna sees herself, and she credits her husband for standing by her every step of the way.

"I look at my body very differently now. It's the body of a warrior, because I've had to get there mentally.

"My husband came to every chemo appointment and sat beside me. Despite losing a breast, my hair and my fertility, not one day did I feel 'unbeautiful' to him. He is the hero of this story," Shauna said.

Shauna continues to manage the long-term impact of her treatment.

"The big one for me is the risk of lymphoedema, and I'm in early menopause now, which happened fast. I'm also in long-term hormone therapy – which may be 10 years – and letting the shadow of it returning get to you can be hard mentally. To hear the word 'cured' one day would be amazing," said Shauna.

Preventive healthcare is now front of mind for her.

"I see my GP every month now, and she's all about preventive healthcare. I have a regimen of annual and quarterly checks, from my teeth to my cervical screen, to MRIs for my breast. Having a good GP is crucial," Shauna said.

The Hologic Global Women's Health Index found fewer than one in four (23 per cent) Australian women and girls aged 15+ report being tested for cancer in the past year. Shauna believes the figure points to systemic barriers within the healthcare system.

"That figure seems so low. Navigating a complex system like healthcare can be bamboozling, and prioritising ourselves isn't always easy.

"Where you live can significantly affect your access to preventive screening – rural and remote communities often face longer travel distances, fewer available services, and greater costs than people living in major cities," said Shauna.

"In Australia, women under 40 aren't eligible for the free BreastScreen program. So out-of-pocket costs for tests adds a financial burden. We need to remove those barriers."

Feeling heard by healthcare providers has been just as important to Shauna as the treatment itself.

"In a system and scenario that often feels overwhelming, it's been important to me to have support and advocacy to navigate both – emotional wellbeing is part of that, not a separate issue. Not everyone will click with you, but persisting until you find the right team of healthcare providers around you is really worthwhile – these are important long-term relationships," Shauna said.

Shauna has a strong message for other Australian women.

"Our health is the most important thing we have. Our bodies do such a great job of carrying us through. We owe it to ourselves to listen to them and give ourselves the same care we give to others.

"To those who've been diagnosed with breast cancer: you are so strong, and your ability to recover is incredible. Tune into the things that give you joy – that's part of the medicine too," said Shauna.

"You're a patient because you have to be patient and that can be hard, but you will bounce back."

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