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Appearance and voice matter to nearly everyone, but perhaps most of all to someone dreaming of a life in the spotlight.

Jessica Tar was a 25-year-old aspiring singer and actress when she went to see her dentist for a painful growth on her tongue. Her dentist referred her to an oral surgeon, who removed a portion of the growth to check for cancer. The biopsy determined the growth was noncancerous.

For a while, after most of the growth was removed, her tongue stopped bothering her. The pain eventually returned, but by then her father was ill

with lung cancer, and Jessica was too focused on being there for her family to pay much attention to her discomfort. Her dentist, satisfied by the results of the earlier biopsy, also told her not to worry.

“I didn’t think I was in any danger,” Jessica says. “I thought it was just something that was going to go away.”

VIDEO | 05:30

Jessica Tar feared her tongue cancer diagnosis would be the end of her acting and singing career. Memorial Sloan Kettering head and neck surgeon Jatin Shah eliminated the tumor, helping Jessica continue to pursue her dream.

Video Details →

But a few months after her father’s death in 2010, her tongue was again bothering her badly enough that she made a second appointment with her oral surgeon. A second biopsy came back positive for tongue cancer.

Her dentist called her into his office and told her the news. “It was like the air was sucked out of the room,” she says. “I was inconsolable.”

Even as she struggled to process the news, Jessica understood she had to act quickly. That evening, she told her husband, T.J., and family about her diagnosis. “Amidst that chaos, you have to climb out if it,” she recalls. “I understood I had to start making calls and making things happen. I needed a plan of action.”

Choosing the Right Surgeon

She made appointments with surgeons at two hospitals, one near her home in Denville, New Jersey, and a second at Memorial Sloan Kettering, where she met the Chief of the Head and Neck Service, Jatin Shah.

He explained that she had squamous cell carcinoma, which arises on the surface of the tongue and is the most common type of oral cancer. Risk factors include smoking and long-term excessive alcohol consumption; Jessica, a lifeguard who teaches swimming at the YMCA, had neither of those.

Dr. Shah told her she needed surgery to remove the tumor, and along with it, a portion of the front of her tongue. He would also remove several lymph nodes in her neck to see if the cancer had spread.

> “The tongue is a very intricate and complex organ.”
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> Jatin P. Shah
> Chief, Head and Neck Service

When Dr. Shah explained his surgical technique, Jessica knew she had found the right surgeon for her.

“The tongue is a very intricate and complex organ,” Dr. Shah says. “The front part of the tongue is responsible for the articulation of speech, whereas the rear part of the tongue is for swallowing. How you remove the tumor and how you reconstruct the tip of the tongue is crucial to the retention and restoration of the clarity of speech.”

Road to Recovery

The good news was that though the cancer was stage 2, Jessica’s lymph nodes were clear of cancer cells and she didn’t need chemotherapy or radiation.

But the first weeks after the surgery were difficult. Her tongue felt foreign in her mouth, and she needed to relearn tasks that she took for granted before, like swallowing, eating, and talking. She was determined to recover her speaking ability as much as she could, by practicing and going to speech therapy.

Six weeks after her surgery, she was feeling well enough to start working as an extra on movie sets. “That way I didn’t have to talk, but I could get back out there and keep moving,” she says.

A few months after her surgery, Jessica again put her acting career on hold — only this time, it was for happy news: She was pregnant with her first child. She wanted to name the baby Kalista, “but I wasn’t sure I was going to be able to say it,” she says. Choosing the name motivated her to keep practicing her speech.

Kalista is now 2. Jessica and T.J.’s second daughter, Laila, was born a year ago. Though she still suffers some neck stiffness and feels as though she lisps when she gets tired, she also recovered the confidence to start auditioning for speaking roles again.

> “You have to be very vigilant in getting yourself checked and very vocal to your dentist and your doctor if something doesn't seem right.”
>
> Jessica Tar

Earlier this year, she landed a role in a feature film playing a nurse in the upcoming sci-fi thriller Zombies vs. Joe Alien. The role made her eligible for Screen Actors Guild membership, which for actors can mean higher pay and greater notice by casting directors and agents.

Filming on the streets of New York City made her realize how far she's come, and how thankful she is that she didn't ignore the painful growth on her tongue.

"You have to be very vigilant in getting yourself checked and very vocal to your dentist and your doctor if something doesn't seem right," Jessica says.

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