

AMBASSADOR, Melissa Monks – Bowel Cancer Survivor

“I was a 34 year old busy working mum, very fit and healthy, with an 18 month toddler. I was eight weeks pregnant when I was suddenly diagnosed with bowel cancer – a stage 3 tumour. I had no obvious symptoms”.

Melissa is a lawyer in a large Melbourne law firm. In October 2009 she scheduled a visit to her GP for a referral to an obstetrician. That visit may well have saved her life. Her GP did a routine uterus and stomach examination and found an abnormality. She referred her to have an ultrasound. An ectopic pregnancy or appendix problem was suspected. The ultrasound did not show anything conclusive, and she was told it was probably nothing to worry about. Melissa’s GP was not satisfied with this result and referred her to see a surgeon. Melissa had her examination and another ultrasound, but at a different hospital, on Monday morning, and was told the surgeon would call her with the findings. She went back to work and to a client luncheon, still feeling relatively unconcerned. The surgeon phoned during this lunch – it was a cancerous tumour and she needed to come and see him that evening, and to prepare for an immediate colonoscopy.

The colonoscopy was performed on Tuesday without harming the pregnancy. A cancerous tumour in the bowel was confirmed, along with inflamed lymph nodes. Melissa underwent almost five hours of surgery on Friday, where the tumour was successfully removed as well as 75% of her bowel and the affected lymph nodes, which were sent for testing. At this stage the baby was still fine. Melissa had seen her obstetrician earlier who had taken photos and video. Melissa spent two weeks in hospital recovering - she had never been away from her son since he was born, and was finding the separation extremely difficult. She was also refusing all pain medication due to its dangers for the baby, whose heartbeat was still strong. The hope was that the surgery had removed all of the cancer, and that no more treatment was needed so that she could continue with her pregnancy.

Unfortunately, tests on the lymph glands revealed the cancer had spread and that chemotherapy was needed. Tragically for Melissa and her husband, this meant the loss of the pregnancy.

“The only way I could deal with the overwhelming grief of losing the baby and endure what I still had to go through, was to believe that the baby was ‘truly an angel which saved your life’, as my obstetrician had told me, and to focus on surviving for my son and my husband”.

On 22 December 2009, Melissa was admitted to hospital to begin her chemotherapy treatment. Melissa’s first chemo cycle finished on Christmas Eve. She and her husband Andrew had a pretty miserable Christmas Day mourning their loss, dealing with the severe side effects of the chemo and worrying about her chances of survival, all while trying to act happy and merry for their son Finn. Chemotherapy treatments continued every two weeks for the next six months. Interspersed were frequent blood tests to check things like platelet levels and white blood cell counts. The treatment was gruelling, with Melissa battling constant and relentless nausea and tiredness, along with neuropathy and hair thinning but was grateful not to lose her hair.

During her treatment, Melissa's company and clients offered exceptional support, organising a cleaner for her as well as a food roster, which delivered weekly home-cooked meals for the family. Melissa's and her husband's family helped out significantly, particularly with childcare and emotional support.

"I was truly humbled by how much our family, colleagues and clients helped us and showed such overwhelming care and support during a difficult time. As a very independent person, at first I was embarrassed to accept any assistance, but it made me realise that it's OK to need help sometimes, and I have formed much closer bonds with many people in my life as a result".

Melissa was determined to do whatever she could to raise awareness of this insidious disease, and so hosted an event during Australia's Biggest Morning Tea in May. She created a web page promoting the event and raised almost \$10,000 for bowel cancer awareness.

On 10 June, 2010 Melissa completed her last chemotherapy session. On 12 June, she celebrated her 35th birthday. Once she was feeling stronger, she returned to work and began exercising regularly again. Since the end of treatment, Melissa has had another colonoscopy and a gastroscopy and other tests which have all been clear.

"In hindsight, I was feeling tired, and had lost some weight, which were potential symptoms of the cancer. But working full time, being pregnant and having a toddler, it didn't seem that unusual..."

Melissa has since learned that she was always at high risk of developing bowel cancer, since testing has now revealed a hereditary bowel cancer genetic condition in her family. Her uncle contracted bowel cancer at the age of 24, and her maternal grandmother died from the disease at just 42. Her son will also have a 50/50 chance of carrying this same bowel cancer genetic condition. She faces a lifetime of testing, and a significantly increased risk of not only a bowel cancer recurrence, but of other related cancers such as uterine cancer.

"I wish I had known more about this insidious disease, and especially how important it is to know your family history, as you are at so much greater risk if anyone in your immediate family has had bowel cancer before the age of 50. I urge people to have a FOB Test, to detect the presence of polyps or cancer, which can usually be successfully treated when caught early."

"Today I am feeling good and very, very grateful to be alive. I really try to 'live in the moment', stress less about things and enjoy life more".

Update October 2011

"We are delighted and overjoyed to share with you news of the latest addition to our family!

With love we welcome:

Abbey Grace

7 pounds 8 ounces

Born 10.45pm

5th October 2011"

Melissa is very committed to her role as an Ambassador for Let's Beat Bowel Cancer. She hopes by sharing her story, that people will become more aware of bowel cancer, realise it is not necessarily an 'old person's disease' and that it can really affect anyone at any time.