

West Point Dad Overcomes Cancer During COVID-19

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For nearly 20 years, Aaron, a 59-year-old from Albany, NY has kept a close eye on his prostate-specific antigen (PSA) test results. PSA levels that are too high may be a sign of prostate cancer. His father and grandfather had both been diagnosed with the disease and Aaron had every intention of spending many years with his two daughters who graduated from the U.S. Military Academy in West Point, NY.

In November, Aaron's PSA levels spiked, and he got the diagnosis he had been fearing. His vigilance was rewarded, however. He and his doctors had caught his prostate cancer early. "My urologist wanted to wait and monitor," says Aaron. "But I insisted on moving forward with treatment after we saw lesions on my MRI."



Aaron with his two daughters who graduated from the U.S. Military Academy in West Point, NY.

An epidemiologist in the New York State Department of Health, Aaron knows how to advocate for his health. Upon receiving his diagnosis, he immediately searched the best hospitals for adult cancer treatment in the U.S. and found Dana-Farber/Brigham and Women's Cancer Center (DF/BWCC). He was impressed with Anthony D'Amico, MD, PhD, a radiation oncologist in the Department of Radiation Oncology at DF/BWCC.

According to Aaron's research, Dr. D'Amico was an expert in treating his type of prostate cancer. A sports fan, Aaron uses a baseball metaphor to describe the renowned cancer expert. He calls Dr. D'Amico the 'Big Papi' of prostate cancer treatment—Big Papi referring to David Ortiz, the former slugger for the Boston Red Sox.

Two Months of Radiation Therapy at DF/BWCC

In January, Aaron met Dr. D'Amico who informed him that his prospects were hopeful. In the past 30 years, the 5-year survival rate for men with prostate cancer had increased from 73 percent to 99 percent due to modern detection methods and innovative treatments, all of which are offered at DF/BWCC.

For Aaron's particular form of prostate cancer, Dr. D'Amico recommended intensity-modulated radiation therapy (IMRT). The cutting-edge cancer therapy matches radiation intensity to the shape of a tumor. This allows oncologists to tailor the radiation dose by varying the amount of radiation given to different parts of the treatment area.

To begin his treatment at DF/BWCC, Aaron moved from New York to the Hope Lodge in Boston. The Hope Lodge, which is about a mile from Brigham and Women's Hospital, offers free accommodation for cancer patients who are travelling more than 40 miles from their home to receive treatment in Boston.

Receiving Cancer Care During the COVID-19 Pandemic

In early February, only a few weeks into Aaron's treatment, the COVID-19 pandemic began making headlines. To ensure the protection of himself and others, safety measures were put in place at the Brigham. Aaron wore a face mask when he entered the hospital, sanitized his hands often and kept at least 6 feet of distance from others.

Amid the uncertainty, Aaron said he received constant updates from his care team in the Department of Radiation Oncology. "I had a million questions about the virus," says Aaron. "But there was no shortage of information from my providers."

To address questions or get a prescription, Aaron met virtually with Dr. D’Amico. “He was always sincere in wanting to know how I was doing,” says Aaron. “He wasn’t too clinical with me and was 100 percent on top of my case.”

During his treatment, Aaron was often exhausted despite sometimes sleeping 12 hours a day. He found solace in his daily walks to and from the Brigham. “On the days when I was tired and depressed, these walks did me good,” he says.

A Sense of Community During Cancer Treatment

Most days, Aaron found community among the other patients who were waiting for their cancer treatments. Even while keeping their distance in the waiting area, Aaron says the patients were still able to “share a tale or two.” He says the “genuine kindness and compassion” of the Brigham’s staff also helped keep his spirits high.

Since Aaron was always in communication with his care team, he says that he wasn’t concerned about visiting the hospital during the COVID-19 pandemic. He trusted that his providers wouldn’t bring him into the hospital if they thought he’d be in harm’s way.



Aaron finishing his last round of radiation therapy at the Dana-Farber/Brigham and Women's Cancer Center.

Near the end of Aaron's treatment, the pandemic had shut down Massachusetts. New safety measures had been implemented at the Brigham, including health screenings before entering the hospital. Knowing that the Brigham had taken all the appropriate safety precautions to keep patients safe, Aaron encourages other patients to "lean into their treatment," even during these challenging times.

Aaron says it was the Brigham's care teams and the hospital's safety protocols that made him feel safe while he underwent cancer treatment. "I never sensed that I was at risk, even during the worst of the crisis," he says. "If Dr. D'Amico said I had to return to the Brigham today, I wouldn't hesitate for a second."

Focusing on Health After Beating Prostate Cancer

On March 23, Aaron wore his favorite "West Point Dad" sweatshirt for his last day of treatment. To signal the end of a long journey, he rang the bell in the lobby of the Radiation Oncology Department. Cancer-free, Aaron is back home in Albany. He will follow up with Dr. D'Amico in 6 months and is making summer plans with his daughters.

Aaron isn't returning to work just yet and uses another sports metaphor to describe his decision stay home. "I'm like a pitcher who's benched during a major game," he says. "But I need to stay off the field right now and focus on my recovery."

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