

# Clean Bill of Health

A uterine cancer scare has made her a believer in diligent self-care

**The specter of** heredity has lurked in the darker corners of Cheryl Perkins' mind for as long as she can remember.

Her mother died of colon cancer four years ago, and nearly all of the women on her mother's side of the family had hysterectomies between age 45 and 50 because of cancer diagnoses.

Knowing that history and what it could mean for her own health didn't shield her from the shock of learning, in November 2009, that she had uterine cancer. Perkins' blue eyes swim with tears and alight on her 10-year-old daughter, as the 49-year-old recalls that day. "It just tore me up," she says. "Just devastating. I don't remember driving home.

"I'd always known, with my family history," she adds after a moment. "But you think things will be different."

Perkins and her husband Mark volley the story of what came next back and forth, one of those couples who functions like a well-drilled doubles team. Perkins' physician, Dr. Laura L. Williams, a gynecologic oncologist at Baptist Hospital and Gynecologic Oncology of Middle Tennessee, scheduled her for surgery the next month to remove her lymph nodes, ovaries, and uterus. "I got to come home the next day," Perkins said. "I was blessed." Because she qualified for robotic surgery, which is far less invasive than a traditional operation, she stayed in the hospital a single night and resumed most normal activity within two weeks.

The surgery went so well, in fact, that it ended ahead of schedule. "She's back early," Mark Perkins remembers thinking. "When I saw [Dr. Williams] walk in, I thought, 'Something's not right.'" A quiet, analytical man who carefully considers every word, he'd tried to prepare himself for whatever news might come. The news that did come, a few weeks later, was better than he could have hoped.

"I remember getting the call a few days before Christmas," she puts in, picking up the story. "They had gotten it all! God bless me, I didn't have to go through radiation or chemotherapy. That was quite a Christmas present," she smiles.

As she continued to recover that spring, Team Perkins considered their next move. Because of Cheryl Perkins' family history of cancer, Dr. Williams suggested she undergo a round of genetic testing. Perkins slides an ordinary-looking leaf of paper across the table, pointing to bold words printed across the top: "Positive for a Deleterious Mutation."

Perkins learned she had Lynch Syndrome, a genetic mutation that gave her an 82 percent risk for colon cancer and a 60 percent risk for endometrial cancer by age 70. Far from feeling like a death

sentence, that information has instead helped her create a strategy for managing her and her family's health. "Now I know what procedures to take to keep myself fit and happy," she says.

For her part, she never misses her six-month checkups, and she'll get a colonoscopy every year for the rest of her life. And based on her doctor's recommendation, she had both her children vaccinated against HPV, a common virus that can cause cervical cancer in women and other cancers in men.

Perkins has also started checking off items on her bucket list, including running a half-marathon. "I'm running for me," she says. "Because believe it or not, I'm pretty cancer-free right now, and I'm thankful."

She's also encouraged her family to become more active, getting the kids into soccer and scouts, and running and biking together. "It's fun!" says her daughter Haley.

Perkins has become a staunch advocate for genetic testing (for people with family histories of cancer) and keeping to a careful schedule of check-ups (for everyone). "Don't wait!" she insists, her voice clotted with emotion. "Go to the doctor! Take time for yourself, because your health's so important. If it hadn't been for me going regular and doing my checkups, I don't know what would have happened," she says, her voice nearly a whisper.

Perkins also advises people to look for a physician like Dr. Williams, who takes the time to talk candidly to patients and, as she puts it, "who believes in you."

"She's great," says Perkins. "She deals with women's health issues ... every single day. She knows what your needs are."

"She told you how it was," her husband Mark adds. "This is what we want to happen, but this is what could happen.' There were no surprises."

"You feel like you're in good hands," says Perkins.

And then she turns to me, that fierce-mom look in her eyes: "Now, you're gonna go make your doctor's appointment, right?" she says. I promise her I will.



**SURVIVOR**  
Cheryl Perkins,  
pictured in Nashville



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