

Youngish With Cancer

Sonia Dolinger, 46, lives in Annapolis, Maryland, where she runs a meal delivery business and fundraises for cancer research. She has chronic lymphocytic leukemia.

June 14, 2021 By Sonia Dolinger

No time is a good time to start a cancer journey. But when you're in your 30s or 40s with children, there are unique challenges. It is truly a family affair.

I was 39 when I was diagnosed with chronic lymphocytic leukemia (CLL), an incurable blood cancer with a typical diagnosis age of 72. The average life expectancy was a mere seven years, I was told—and that was before testing revealed that my flavor of CLL was more aggressive than most.

I dove headfirst into research, trying to find just one person who had beaten an aggressive case of CLL. I never did. But I did find that new targeted therapies were changing the once-dismal trajectory of this disease. When it was time to receive treatment after my watch-and-wait period, I found a groundbreaking clinical trial combining three new non-chemotherapy drugs that was being offered in Ohio and Germany. While I love me some schnitzel, Ohio was more practical for this Maryland mom.

I had three children (ages 12, 11 and 5) waiting for me at home and a more-than-full-time job as well as volunteer responsibilities. I would need to leave it all behind to receive treatment, sometimes weekly, over 16 months. I was overwhelmed.

How would I tell my children that I have cancer without causing pain? The C-word comes with a distinct heaviness, an emotional bell you cannot un-ring. Plus, they had just witnessed the long difficult journey of my mother's fight with terminal ovarian cancer. She had passed just weeks before my diagnosis.

I wanted to shield them from the heartache and helplessness I felt while she endured cancer. I knew firsthand what they were about to feel, and it wasn't pleasant. I phrased it with a falsely confident smile and delicate ambiguity for their young minds. I wanted them to know that, although I would be coming and going over these months, I would be OK, and they would be OK too. We'd get through it together.

I had complex and painful side effects. At home, I was bedridden. My husband became my caregiver, taking over everything I normally did on top of his very full work plate, while worrying endlessly for my welfare. We dropped the ball on well doctor visits and forgot social engagements.

Over two years, I saw only one of my son's football games.

We downsized to an easier-to-manage home, giving us financial breathing room, as I was physically and mentally unable to work and unsure whether or when I could possibly return. I'm happy to say that I've recently rejoined the workforce. I started a meal delivery business and donate proceeds to two patient-focused nonprofits.

In the end, I came through treatment battered and bruised but had scored a complete remission. It's seven years since I was diagnosed! My entire family grew emotionally. My husband and children are more empathetic to those facing struggles of all kinds and motivated to help others in need. We've raised more than \$60,000 to pay it forward to the next family facing cancer.

We really did get through this together.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

<http://beta.docker.cancerhealth.com/article/youngish-cancer>