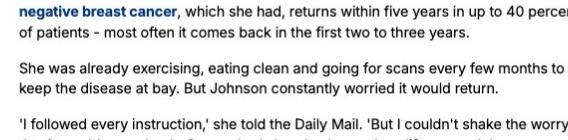


m+ EXCLUSIVE I am one of just 35 women in the world to get the new breast cancer vaccine. I'm convinced it saved my life... here's everything you need to knowBy LUKE ANDREWS U.S. SENIOR HEALTH REPORTER
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Chase Johnson was terrified that her cancer would come back.

The attorney was just 31 years old when doctors discovered she had the most aggressive form of breast cancer in early 2021. They said that if she had delayed getting the dime-sized lump diagnosed by a few weeks, she likely would not have survived.

The North Carolina native endured countless rounds of chemotherapy, surgery and radiation before the disease was declared undetectable six months later.

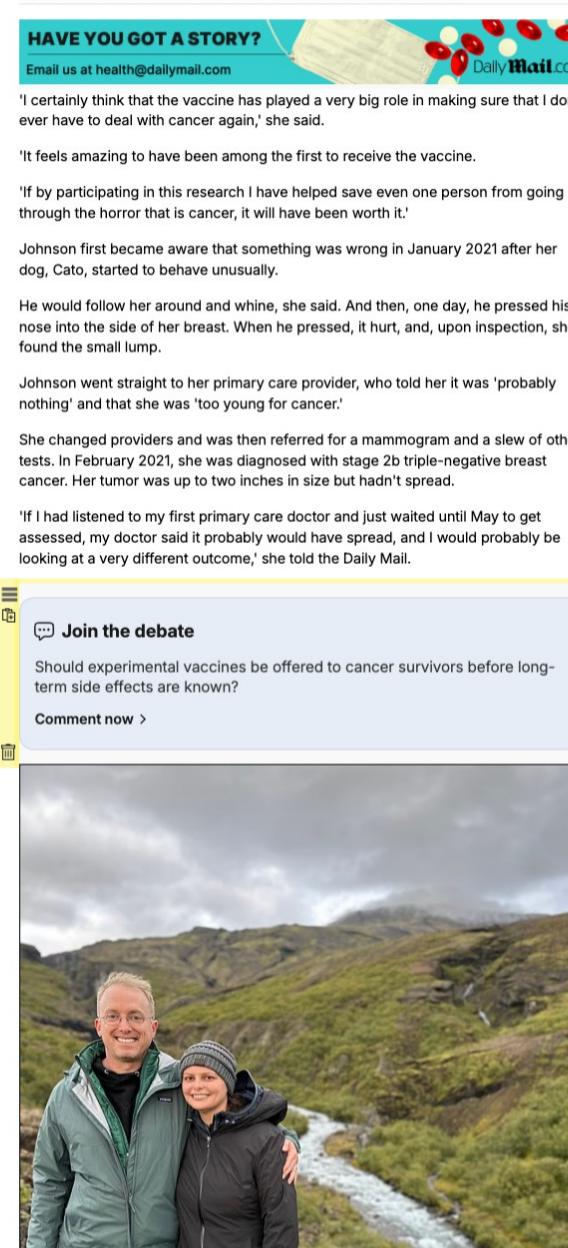
But even then, doctors warned it would likely return. They told Johnson that **triple-negative breast cancer**, which she had, returns within five years in up to 40 percent of patients - most often it comes back in the first two to three years.

She was already exercising, eating clean and going for scans every few months to keep the disease at bay. But Johnson constantly worried it would return.

'I followed every instruction,' she told the Daily Mail. 'But I couldn't shake the worry that it would come back. Cancer had already changed my life so much.'

That worry prompted intense research that ultimately led her to become one of just 35 women worldwide to receive an experimental cancer vaccine.

Now, four and a half years on from her July 2021 surgery, Johnson, 36, is still cancer-free. She believes the shot helped to save her life and that it will keep the cancer at bay for good.



Chase Johnson (pictured), now 36, from North Carolina, was among 35 women to receive an experimental breast cancer vaccine. She said she felt it had saved her life

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'I certainly think that the vaccine has played a very big role in making sure that I don't ever have to deal with cancer again,' she said.

'It feels amazing to have been among the first to receive the vaccine.'

'If by participating in this research I have helped save even one person from going through the horror that is cancer, it will have been worth it.'

Johnson first became aware that something was wrong in January 2021 after her dog, Cato, started to behave unusually.

He would follow her around and whine, she said. And then, one day, he pressed his nose into the side of her breast. When he pressed, it hurt, and, upon inspection, she found the small lump.

Johnson went straight to her primary care provider, who told her it was 'probably nothing' and that she was 'too young for cancer.'

She changed providers and was then referred for a mammogram and a slew of other tests. In February 2021, she was diagnosed with stage 2b triple-negative breast cancer. Her tumor was up to two inches in size but hadn't spread.

'If I had listened to my first primary care doctor and just waited until May to get assessed, my doctor said it probably would have spread, and I would probably be looking at a very different outcome,' she told the Daily Mail.

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Should experimental vaccines be offered to cancer survivors before long-term side effects are known?

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© Cleveland Clinic
Johnson (pictured with her husband, Ben) went through chemotherapy, radiation and surgery before she was offered the vaccine

The American Cancer Society says 92 percent of patients survive longer than five years if this cancer is detected before it spreads. If it spreads to other areas of the body, that prognosis drops to 15 percent.

Johnson started her treatment in March 2021.

She received eight rounds of chemotherapy in three months, which made her tumor smaller, less prominent and harder to feel through the skin.

Then, in July 2021, she had surgery to remove the tumor and nearby lymph nodes that doctors feared could also contain the cancer. At this point, physicians said her cancer was nondetectable.

Even then, because of the risk of recurrence, she was referred in mid-August for 24 rounds of radiation followed by six months of chemotherapy.

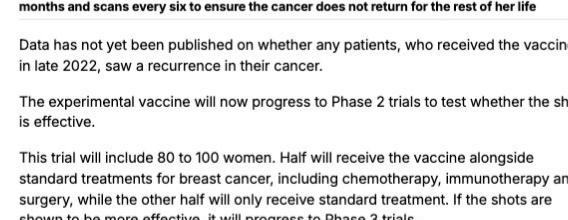
After that, doctors switched her to blood tests every three months and body scans twice a year to ensure the cancer did not return.

But, wanting to do more, Johnson turned to the internet, which was where she found the Cleveland Clinic and Anixa Biosciences breast cancer vaccine trial.

Johnson received an experimental shot, known as the a-lactalbumin vaccine, which teaches the immune system to attack a protein called a-lactalbumin.



© Cleveland Clinic
Pictured: Johnson in the hospital. She said that cancer had completely changed the trajectory of her life



© Cleveland Clinic
Johnson (pictured) is thrilled to be among the first to receive the vaccine, and said that her contribution helps even one person, it would have been worth it

This protein is normally only present in breast tissue during lactation, but it is also produced by about 70 percent of triple-negative breast cancers, which is diagnosed in about 30 percent of women.

In December 2022, Johnson only received the three-dose vaccine.

The first shot was in her left abdomen, the second in her right inner thigh and the third in the right side of her left abdomen.

She said the vaccine was not painful at the injection site and before a lump appeared and never lasted more than a few hours.

She was inoculated in the Phase 1 trials, which are designed to test whether the vaccine is safe for human use.

It included three groups of women: those who had recovered from early-stage triple-negative breast cancer, those who had not undergone treatment for early-stage disease but had a genetic predisposition, such as the BRCA gene.

Overall, the researchers found that 74 percent of the women developed an immune response to the vaccine.

When they found it was safe, there were no serious adverse effects detected.

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