

LeBron James remembers his spring surgery on jaw tumor: 'It was a nerve-racking experience'

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Few fans noticed the growing lump on LeBron James' face as the 2009 playoffs wore on last spring. Visible in this photo (on the side of James' face, just below his right ear), the growth was determined to be benign, but required a six-hour surgery to remove after the end of the season. "I was working with some good professionals," James said of the surgeons who aided him. "They were telling me they didn't think it was cancer, but we had to be sure, of course."

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Some of the toughest days for LeBron James over the last year had nothing to do with basketball. It was the gut-churning period when he waited to make sure he didn't have cancer.

In his first interview on the subject since surgery to remove a tumor from his jaw area in June, James told The Plain Dealer there were several jittery days last January after he had a biopsy on the growing lump under his right ear.



Lisa DeJong/The Plain Dealer With the health concerns behind him and Shaquille O'Neal alongside as the season approaches, there's no reason for LeBron James not to be optimistic about his and the Cavaliers' prospects.

"It was a nerve-racking experience but I knew at that point I had to get it done," James said. "I was on edge for those few days, I was lucky the season was going on and we were playing really well so I could concentrate on basketball. My family was nervous."

Doctors at the Cleveland Clinic found a growth on James' parotid gland, which produces saliva. Those sorts of tumors are somewhat rare, on average there's usually around 2,500 cases each year. It represents only about three percent of all discovered tumors and just six percent of tumors found in the head and neck area, according to several medical reference Web sites.

The better news for James was that between 70 and 80 percent of such tumors are benign. That is what the doctors told him, trying to set him at ease.

"I was working with some good professionals," James said. "They were telling me they didn't think it was cancer, but we had to be sure, of course."

The news turned out to be good; the mass wasn't cancerous. But if it was allowed to grow it could become malignant and so James made plans to have surgery to remove it as soon as possible after the season ended.

It didn't cause James much pain, unless he was hit directly on the right side of the jaw. It happened a few times when he was fouled driving to the basket. In those instances, James was sometimes slow to get up, leaving some to believe he was milking the hits for the referees' benefit. Some of the time he was just suffering in silence, never discussing the tumor with the media.

The surgery date ended up arriving faster than James wanted. He went under the knife on June 3, just two days after the Cavs were eliminated in the Eastern Conference Finals.

It wasn't an easy or simple procedure.

James was told that the surgery, performed by Dr. Frank Papay at the Cleveland Clinic, would last between two and three hours. It was James' first experience under anesthesia, the first time in his life he'd been put to sleep for a medical procedure, which made him uneasy.

James woke up more than six hours later, the operation taking twice as long as expected. To get the tumor, which by that time was large enough that it raised an obvious bump that fans began noticing when James was at the foul line or doing interviews, Dr. Papay had to make a large incision from the side of James' head and around the bottom and to the back of his ear. That area is filled with nerves and muscles that control the face, making it delicate and time-consuming to perform.

"I wasn't scared," James said, "but it wasn't something I was comfortable with."

There is now a thin, half moon-shaped scar around James' ear, though the surgeons did a good job of hiding it on a face seen by millions on a regular basis.

"I have a little bit of a scar, but it's OK, I'm a Chamillionaire," James joked, referring to the rapper who has lyrics about scars.

During the summer it became rather ironic that there was so much media focus involving non-basketball issues with James, but none of it touched on the surgery. There was plenty of discussion of the infamous non-handshake in Orlando and then the so-called "dunkgate" after his Nike camp in Akron when a Xavier University player dunked on him and officials took the videotape. James even got chided for wearing a T-shirt while on vacation in France that read "Check My \$tats."

Yet in the dozens of interviews he held around the world promoting his camps, book and documentary, those were featured topics. No one asked about the surgery, which was a defining moment in James' off-season.

He couldn't work out for a few weeks, but in the end that actually might have been a good thing. There was time for rest, and some relief.

"I just stayed in bed for a week or so. I could talk and eat but I didn't really want to do much," James said. "I just relaxed and got some of the best sleep I've had in my life."

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