Nicole Upchurch is an active high school student, playing for her varsity soccer team in Somerset, Ky. But last year she suddenly felt ill and tired and began losing weight. When her mom started making frequent trips to pick Nicole up early from school or soccer practice, they knew something was wrong.

Nicole’s left index finger became swollen, so in September of 2012 she went to an urgent care center near her home. The providers there diagnosed it as a spider bite. The urgent care center prescribed steroids to reduce the swelling. But Nicole’s other symptoms didn’t go away, and the swelling reappeared over her winter break.

She scheduled an appointment with a local orthopaedic surgeon in Somerset who referred her to a hand specialist in Lexington. Doctors thought Nicole might have a cancerous tumor on her finger. They removed the tumor and performed a bone graft where the tumor had worn away part of her bone. A short time later, the tumor was back again.

Expert diagnosis at UK
This time, her doctors sent her to Patrick W. O’Donnell, MD, an orthopaedic oncologist recently recruited by UK HealthCare. Dr. O’Donnell is the

“I wholeheartedly believed they knew what they were doing. And they obviously did because it’s working.”
– Nicole Upchurch
only orthopaedic oncologist on staff at any hospital in Central and Eastern Kentucky. He specializes in treating patients with bone tumors.

As an academic medical center, UK HealthCare is often the best choice for patients who have rare or complicated conditions that are difficult to diagnose and treat. Our doctors are able to provide the multidisciplinary, highly specialized care patients need.

Dr. O’Donnell diagnosed Nicole with a giant-cell tumor. Giant-cell tumors are rare and aggressive but non-cancerous. According to the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons, giant-cell tumors occur in about one person per million each year. And it is even more rare to find a giant-cell tumor in a patient younger than 20.

“Thinking your child might have cancer, it scares you half to death,” Tammy said. “So when we got the answers at UK, even though it was still a little scary, it was almost a relief. You hate for your baby to lose a part of them, but we were glad to know they could get rid of the tumor.”

Dr. Iocono was able to remove some of the tumors. But their removal caused part of her lungs to collapse, and she required a chest tube and a three-week hospital stay to help her lungs stay inflated.

By her team’s senior night, Dr. Iocono told Nicole she could finally play for more than 10 minutes without having to sit out 10 minutes to rest.

“They said I can play as long as I’m feeling good,” Nicole said.

Not cancer, but similar treatment
Like any caring mother, Nicole’s mom, Tammy, was concerned for her daughter’s health.

“I think that’s why everyone was like, ‘This is crazy,’” Nicole said. “It just doesn’t happen.”

Because of the aggressive nature of the tumor, Dr. O’Donnell removed Nicole’s finger. He also performed a chest scan and found spots on Nicole’s lungs. Dr. O’Donnell referred her to Joseph A. Iocono, MD, chief of pediatric surgery at UK HealthCare, who sees pediatric-tumor patients.

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For more information about choosing a multispecialty group or getting a second opinion at UK HealthCare, call 800-333-8874.