

FALL 2021

People

HEALTH



'I WAS
TERRIFIED.
IT WAS
THE WORST
TIME OF
MY ENTIRE
LIFE'

**Sherri
Shepherd**
HOW I TOOK
CONTROL OF MY
HEALTH

Howie Mandel
COPING
WITH ANXIETY
AND OCD

MY BATTLE *with* **SHINGLES**

Two weeks after she gave birth to her baby boy, Christina Herman was diagnosed with a rare form of shingles. Now the 32-year-old California mom reveals how the frightening experience has helped her live a healthier life

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EDITOR'S LETTER SPOTLIGHT ON HEALTH

Welcome to the latest issue of *People Health*, a special supplement from the editors of *People*. *People Health* aims to inspire you with stories of individuals overcoming medical challenges—and to help you live your healthiest life.

In this issue we take on shingles, the painful infection that

afflicts nearly 1 million Americans each year. Our cover subject, Christina Herman, developed



shingles shortly after the birth of her first child in 2018. Also inside: Howie Mandel talks about coping with OCD; TV star Sherri Shepherd opens up about living with type 2 diabetes; and celeb chefs share their healthy recipes.

We hope you enjoy this issue of *People Health*.

Dan

DAN WAKEFORD, EDITOR IN CHIEF

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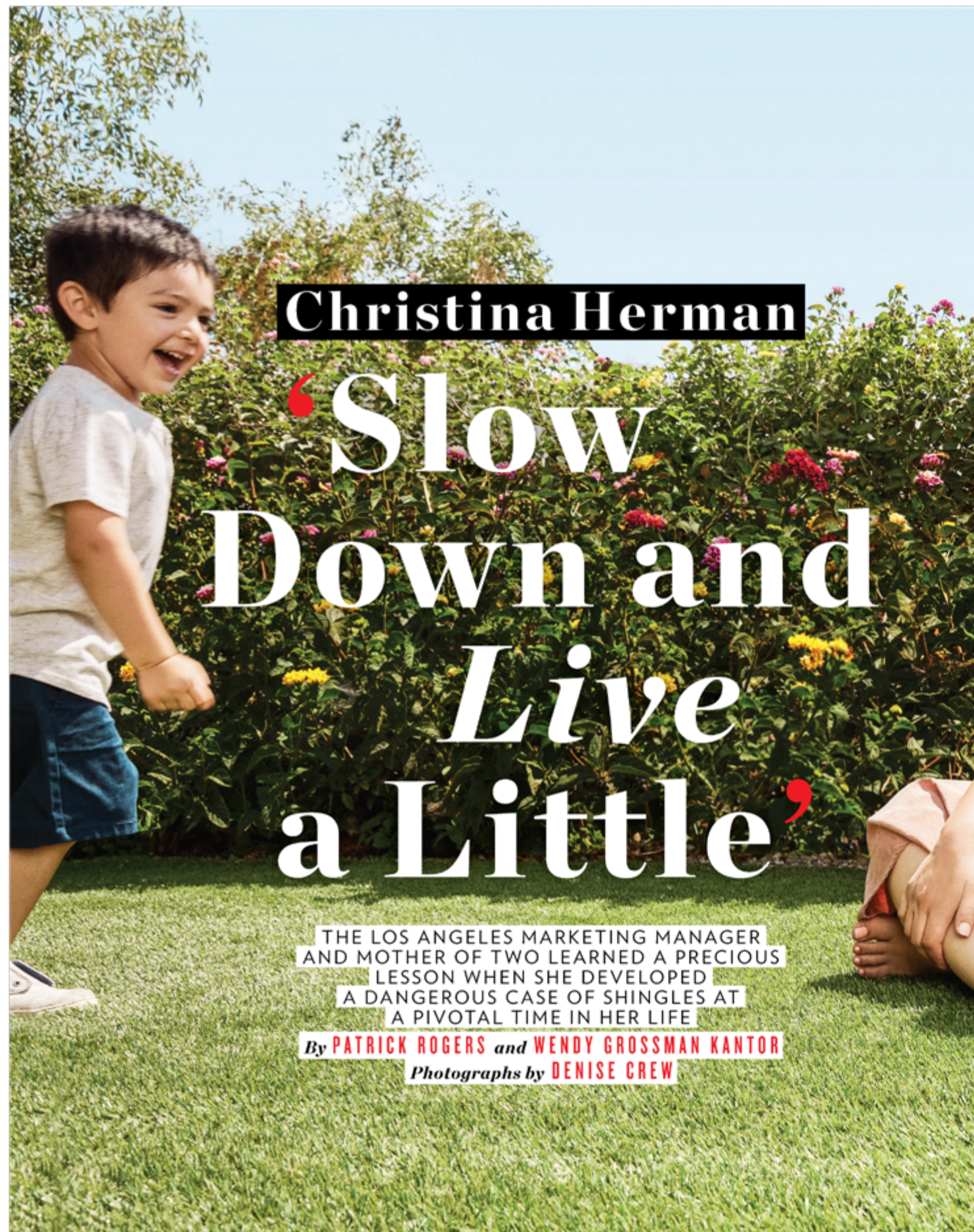
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Christina Herman

‘Slow Down and Live a Little’

THE LOS ANGELES MARKETING MANAGER AND MOTHER OF TWO LEARNED A PRECIOUS LESSON WHEN SHE DEVELOPED A DANGEROUS CASE OF SHINGLES AT A PIVOTAL TIME IN HER LIFE

By **PATRICK ROGERS** and **WENDY GROSSMAN KANTOR**

Photographs by **DENISE CREW**



A Mother's Day
“I get so much energy from them,” says Christina Herman (at home in L.A. with her son Griffin, 3, and 19-month-old daughter Emilia).

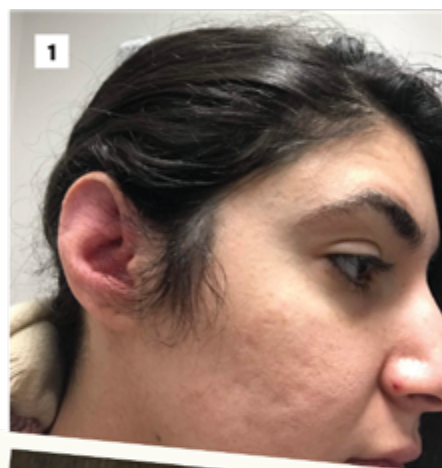
For Christina Herman, the first days of motherhood were proving to be stressful and exhausting.

A week after the birth of her first child in February 2018, Christina was low on sleep and still in significant pain from the delivery. She was also struggling to get her newborn son Griffin to breast-feed. “Basically it was around the clock, I was awake all hours of the day, with my baby crying at my breast,” she says. Then one evening, during a family gathering to meet the newborn, Christina suddenly felt a sharp pain in her neck. “I just chalked it up to looking down too much when I was trying to nurse him,” recalls Christina. “I didn’t think it was a big deal.”

But over the next few days the pain intensified, and spread to Christina’s right ear, which reddened and swelled to twice its normal size. Adding to her discomfort was a constant ringing in her ear; then, a week after her symptoms began, she woke up to find that the right side of her face was completely paralyzed. Frightened by the rapid spread of her symptoms, she made several trips to an urgent-care center, where doctors initially treated her for an ear infection before discovering that Christina was actually suffering from a rare form of shingles, known as Ramsay-Hunt syndrome.

Like other forms of shingles, which, according to the CDC, will afflict nearly one in three Americans, Ramsay-Hunt syndrome is a debilitating infection brought on by the same virus that causes chicken pox. Small red blisters that cause shooting pain at the slightest touch appear on the torso, in the eyes or—as in Christina’s case—inside the ears, usually on just one side of the body.

While Christina’s pain was excru-



A Painful Syndrome
1. Herman’s right ear turned red and swelled to twice its usual size. “The pain inside was stabbing,” she says. 2. Reunited with newborn Griffin after recovering from her Hunts-Ramsay syndrome. 3. Shingles affected Herman’s facial nerve, causing paralysis on the right side of her face.

ciating, the bigger concern for the first-time mother and her doctors was passing chicken pox on to her baby. The virus can be deadly for newborns who haven’t been vaccinated for the disease, which they can catch from people with active shingles. Doctors told Christina to avoid all physical contact with her baby until the pus-filled blisters inside her ear had fully healed. “I was honestly in shock,” says Christina, now 32, who remembers breaking down in tears in the pharmacy waiting area. “It was supposed to be the happiest time of my life... but not being able to touch my son was a nightmare—the worst time of my life.”

That the disease struck at such a tense—and exhausting—time in Christina’s life was likely no coincidence; stress is a common trigger for shingles. “I’ve always been go-go-go; I have to do this, I have to do that,” says Christina, the marketing manager for a Pasadena-based nonprofit. “My doctor thought it was the stress of what I went through during childbirth and getting no sleep, because I was trying so hard to breastfeed my kid, that triggered the virus—it was too much.” But coming down with shingles at the worst possible moment also taught her a precious lesson. “I learned I have to take care of myself,” she says. “If you just go with the flow and let yourself take it easy, it’ll be easier to get through [the stressful times].”



Christina grew up in the Los Angeles area and met her husband, Steven Herman, when both were 17 and students at Hoover High School in Glendale. “We went to senior prom and have been



together ever since,” says Christina, who married Steven, 32, and a software developer, in 2016. The couple were overjoyed when they found out that Christina was pregnant on their first wedding anniversary—and with Griffin’s arrival on Feb. 15, 2018, their life seemed to be coming together perfectly.

The first sign that anything was wrong came with that sudden neck pain a week after Griffin’s birth, when Christina was entertaining her parents, who had dropped by to see the newborn. The following day, she developed a sharp pain in her ear. “It was like someone was stabbing me in the eardrum, and it was unrelenting,” she says. “The second the Tylenol or Advil wore off, it would be right back.” A quick trip to a local urgent-care

“**I couldn’t walk on my own. I couldn’t get up to use the bathroom because shingles made me so dizzy”**

center led to a diagnosis of an ear infection, and Christina came home with a topical cream and antibiotics. “I was so tired I couldn’t do anything except lie there and take the medication. I didn’t know what was going on.”

Then several days later, on Saturday morning, she managed to make herself a bowl of oatmeal—and discovered she couldn’t chew. “I tried to take my first bite, and the oatmeal just fell out of my mouth,” she says. “I was like, ‘Oh my God, what’s going on?’ So I ran to the bathroom and looked at myself in the mirror, and the right side of my face was paralyzed.” Christina returned to the urgent-care center where doctors put her symptoms together and came up with the Ramsay-Hunt diagnosis. The rash in her ear was actually shingles, and the infection it produced had affected her main facial nerve, causing the paralysis.



Power of Positivity

"It's important to keep lighthearted, because shingles could have broken me," says Herman (with husband Steven). "I was able to find the silver lining."

But that wasn't even the worst of it. Because that main facial nerve also controls balance, Christina developed an intense case of vertigo—which left her feeling so dizzy, she couldn't get out of bed without help for the next seven days. "It was really devastating," she says. And adding to her fears was the ongoing threat to her newborn son. "I was terrified because I'd already had this [infection] for a week without anyone knowing, and I was still taking care of him," says Christina, who monitored the baby for symptoms. "We kept an eye on him, and luckily he was fine."

“I love being outside, hiking and just being connected with nature. It really fills me up””

Thanks to a regimen of antivirals and nausea medication—and Steven's support ("He was taking care of me and the baby")—Christina was on her way to recovery and reunited with her son within a week. "The second

the doctor said that I could hold him again, I grabbed him and was telling him how much I love him."

Even so, it took nearly two months for Christina's dizziness to fully go away, and she still has difficulty completely closing her right eye—which her doctor says may be the result of damage to the nerve that controls her facial movement. "You can see it most when I'm eating or smiling," she says. "The right side of my mouth is just a little lower than the left side. But my face is 80 percent back to what it was before."

Since her recovery, Christina has made a point of focusing on her health—and monitoring her stress. She swims a couple of times a week and takes daily walks with the family's dog, a black-and-white Lab-husky mix named Luna. And after years of wrestling with fad diets that didn't work for her, she has adopted a strategy called "intuitive eating" that lets her choose what to eat and what to avoid. "I focus on what my body wants and needs, and I exercise when it feels good," she says.

Her outlook on parenting has changed, as well. When she became pregnant with her second child, Emilia,

who was born in December 2019, she was determined to avoid the stress and exhaustion that her doctor said contributed to her shingles. "With my daughter it was totally different. We didn't leave the house; we ate frozen meals we had prepped," she says. "We took it easy and had less anxiety—and everybody was healthy."

"And that's my advice to anybody who has shingles," she adds. "Take things one day at a time. It'll seem like the road is really long—and you can't see an end to it—but it will get better." ●