



When the Diagnosis is Cancer

Now what?

Anyone who has ever had breast cancer remembers what it felt like hearing the words, “You have cancer.” You may feel angry, afraid, cheated, overwhelmed and uncertain about the future. But in time, you learn to take back control of your life. Your medical team, family and friends (co-survivors) can help you. Here’s how:

STEP 1: Planning your journey

Your doctor reviewed your pathology report and made a diagnosis of breast cancer. The same report will be used to determine your prognosis (chance for recovery). It will also be used to suggest a course of treatment. Making this treatment plan is the final step in the process of healing.

You can get copies of all your medical records, including your pathology report. You may want to look at these records with your doctor so he or she can translate the technical information for you. Your medical records will also be helpful in case you get a second opinion. This will help you become more informed. After all, you will make the final decisions about what is best for you.

STEP 2: Making treatment decisions

Today, there are many treatment options. Treatment for breast cancer can be thought of in two ways: local therapy and systemic therapy.

Local therapy treats the cancer in a limited (local) area, such as the breast, chest wall and lymph nodes in the underarm. The goal is to make sure it does not come back to that area. Local therapy can be surgery with or without radiation therapy. Surgery can be a lumpectomy (only the tumor and some normal tissue surrounding the tumor are removed, but the rest of the breast remains intact) or a mastectomy (the entire breast is removed). Some lymph nodes in the underarm may also be removed during surgery. These will be tested to see if they



Your co-survivors (family and friends) can help you through the process of living with breast cancer.

contain cancer. The breast and underarm area may also be treated with radiation therapy.

After a mastectomy, a woman may choose breast reconstruction to help restore the look and feel of the breast. This surgery may be done at the same time as the mastectomy or later. It can help a woman feel more comfortable about how she looks and restore confidence in her sexuality.

Talk to a plastic surgeon, other doctors, family members and other people who have had reconstruction before you make your final decision.

Systemic therapy aims to get rid of cancer cells that may have spread from the breast to other parts of the body. It includes chemotherapy, hormone therapy and targeted therapy. Not all women will need systemic therapy.

Your doctor may suggest several treatment options. Consider each option carefully. Do not rush to make a decision. Ask questions. Ask about the risks and benefits. Discuss your concerns. Consider your priorities. The more facts you have, the more likely you will make an informed decision. Feel free to get a second opinion before you make a final decision.

STEP 3: Knowing what to expect

Once you have made a treatment decision, but before you actually begin, find out what you can expect during treatment.

Most treatments have some side effects. For every treatment your doctor recommends, ask:

- What side effects are common?
- How long will the side effects last?
- What can be done to prevent or treat side effects?
- What side effects should I report?

You may have some pain with certain treatments. Pain can be treated. Talk to your doctor about what type of pain you feel, where you feel it, what helps ease the pain and how your current pain medication helps.

Nausea is a common side effect of chemotherapy. Today, nausea and vomiting can be treated with anti-nausea drugs. Sometimes the drugs are given before chemotherapy to prevent nausea from occurring. If you have any questions or concerns about nausea, talk to your doctor.

Cancer-related fatigue varies from person to person. Talk to your doctor about your symptoms. Your doctor may suggest keeping a fatigue diary, planning activities for times when your energy level is highest, getting enough sleep at night, taking short naps and breaks, exercising to prevent fatigue and eating small meals or snacks. A support group may be helpful during this time as well.

Many drugs can help. Most side effects go away after the treatment ends. Talk to your doctor or nurse during treatment to let them know what side effects you are having.

STEP 4: Dealing with treatment

Some treatments can last months to several years. Throughout your treatment, you'll have doctor's visits, exams and lab tests. Remember to take care of yourself. Eat well, stay active and get plenty of sleep. Join a support group to talk to others who are going through the same treatment as you.

After your treatment ends, focus your energies on beginning the physical, emotional and spiritual course of healing. Keep all your follow-up appointments and maintain open communication with your doctor.

Who should I tell about my breast cancer?

It is really up to you. Start with the people you feel most comfortable around. Take your time and wait until you are ready.

Resources

Susan G. Komen®
www.komentoolkits.org

Pink Alliance
www.pinkalliance.net