



BC Cancer Agency

CARE + RESEARCH

An agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority

After Breast Cancer Treatment What next?



An Awareness Guide

“You’re not crazy, this is all normal and many have been through it ahead of you.”

As you may be discovering, the breast cancer journey continues beyond the diagnosis and treatment phase. The initial disbelief, anger, guilt and black mood that you may have experienced when you first heard you had cancer may be fading now.

It is a real accomplishment to have completed your treatment for breast cancer. However, after you may experience some feelings or encounter some issues that are new to you or come as a surprise. Common themes include: trying to “find yourself”, re-evaluating your life and spirituality, and changes in your body and energy. Some women have said that the end of treatment can bring with it a feeling of being “left on your own.”

This pamphlet was created with input from women, who have been diagnosed with breast cancer and wish to share a range of concerns, which you may or may not experience. The first section is meant as a guide to heighten your awareness. The second section describes some pathways to health and well-being and information sources.

We all have different methods of coping with the many unexpected surprises that can arise after breast cancer treatment. We hope that you will find this awareness guide helpful.

FATIGUE

“After treatment - one feels off-balance, suddenly on your own; you must learn to trust your body again.”

Fatigue is the kind of chronic tiredness that a good night's sleep doesn't solve and may last longer than you expected. This can lead to frustration or longing for the energy you used to have. Pay attention to the feeling of heaviness in your body. Fatigue will ease and energy can be regained over time. Some have found gentle exercise helps. In the meantime, choose how you use your limited energy in your day-to-day tasks.

SADNESS & DEPRESSION

“My oncologist told me he would worry about me if I did not go through some sort of let down (sadness) stage after completing treatment. He assured me that this is very natural.”

There is a difference between sadness and depression. Sadness comes and goes. Feeling some sadness after treatment is very common. Treatment is so busy that it may not be until after it is complete that you have the time or strength to reflect on your experience.

Depression is like a black tunnel with no light at the end and creates many emotional and physical symptoms. Depression can feel heavy and tiring and may be a reason to seek help from a counsellor or your doctor.

FRAGILITY

“I often feel that life will never return to ‘normal’, and I have been grieving for the old life. I am slowly coming to the conclusion that it may never be normal again and that’s okay.”

You may feel fragile or emotionally raw or as if your body has let you down. The feeling of living a carefree life may have left you. You may feel that your future and dreams have been taken away. You may find that others do not understand these feelings. You are not alone!

FEAR

“I’ve become a hypochondriac! I think every lump or bump on my body means the cancer has come back!”

Fear of having cancer come back is a common feeling. It is natural to worry when something in your body does not feel right and it can be difficult to balance this uncertainty with day-to-day living. It is also common to experience an increased fear of death after treatment has finished. Counselling, support groups or others who have been down this road might be able to help you deal with this.

ANGER

“There were moments when I was both fearful and OUTRAGED. More frequent were periodic waves of vulnerability and like waves, they passed but were very intense for short periods of time.”

You may be so focused on the treatment it’s not until it is finished that the reality of the diagnosis takes hold. Many women feel angry because they have done “everything right” and cannot make sense of being given a diagnosis of breast cancer. Some women are unaware that they are angry but have “bad moods” that they can’t explain. Anger and irritability are common ways of dealing with emotional feelings.

SEXUALITY

“I definitely felt a disassociation with my physical body. I have learned to rediscover my body and learned to like it again.”

You may experience changes in self-esteem, libido and feelings about yourself as a woman. Physical and emotional changes may affect your intimate relationship and/or your confidence in future relationships. Learning you are still a “whole woman” regardless of changes to your exterior body is important.

MEMORY LOSS

“What was that? I can’t remember a thing!”

Memory loss is an important factor which can impact your every day life. This can be very distressing and many people develop new strategies for dealing with it. “Post-It” notes may become your best friend! You may find that lists of tasks and appointments, calendars of events, relying on others and a sense of humour helpful.

TREATMENT-INDUCED MENOPAUSE

“Every day I am coping with the reality that I may never have children. Being 30 and not knowing plays a bigger role in my life than I ever could have imagined.”

Depending on the treatment you received, you may experience ongoing symptoms associated with menopause. These include physical changes such as: hot flashes, weight gain, vaginal dryness, possible osteoporosis concerns and difficulty sleeping. The emotional impact may be felt as mood swings, lowered self-esteem and loss of concentration. Fertility issues may be a source of concern or sadness for some women.

HEREDITARY BREAST CANCER

“I’m more worried about my daughters than I am about myself.”

You may be concerned that your diagnosis will cause members of your family to be at increased risk for developing cancer. It is important to realize that less than 10% of breast cancer is hereditary. If you have questions about hereditary breast cancer, you may seek information from the BC Cancer Agency’s Hereditary Cancer Program.

LYMPHEDEMA

“Becoming a member of Abreast in a Boat Society was the start of my pathway to health. Learning to paddle, the sheer exhilaration of racing, sharing joy and sadness with new friends was my road to recovery.”

Women who have had lymph nodes removed from under their arm and radiation therapy may develop lymphedema (swelling) in the affected arm. Some will have temporary swelling, which disappears within a few months. A small percentage of women will develop lymphedema years later. However, many women have maintained and/or increased their activity levels after breast cancer surgery without developing lymphedema.

EMPLOYMENT

“My greatest concerns were employment/cash flow and how to think about/plan for the future.”

How and when to re-enter the work force is another decision that you may need to make. There are many factors that will influence your decision, including your level of fatigue, how you are feeling emotionally and long-term disability benefits. It is important to use your physical, mental and emotional status as a guide when considering a return to work.

INSURANCE

“My ego took a big hit when my extended health insurance company notified me that my premiums were going up substantially after the completion of my treatment.”

Life and travel insurance may be affected by your diagnosis of breast cancer. Consult with your insurance company regarding these issues.

PATHWAYS TO HEALING AND WELL-BEING

YOU DO NOT HAVE TO BE A HERO!

“With the support of my family and friends, breast cancer has given me the opportunity to rediscover myself.”

It is important to recognize physical and emotional changes that you may experience after you have completed treatment for breast cancer and to know that help is available.

Respect your emotional needs and pay attention to them.

Speak your truths and keep the lines of communication open to your family and friends... they can be your greatest source of support.

REST, BE KIND TO YOURSELF AND PUT YOURSELF ON A PATH TO HEALING.

REHABILITATION & MEDICAL ASSISTANCE

Your General Practitioner is one place to start for referrals to rehabilitation services and professional counsellors. Speaking to a psychosocial professional counsellor through the BC Cancer Agency or local community programs can be helpful too. Do not be afraid to seek counselling.

- Physiotherapists
- Complementary Treatments
- Psychiatrists, Psychologists
- Counsellors
- Vocational Rehabilitation Counsellors

Some women require medical intervention to deal with depression, sexual challenges and lymphedema. A healthcare professional (nurse, counsellor, doctor) may have good advice in these situations.

PEER / PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

“Those who have walked the same path have a richness that family may not.”

Connecting with others who have experienced breast cancer through support groups in your local community, dragon boat team participation, on-line websites or support over the telephone may be helpful in your emotional recovery. (See resource list on page 12)

- Canadian Cancer Society, Cancer Information Service
1.888.939.3333

Call to find out what is available in your community.

LIFESTYLE

“I needed to prove I could beat the cancer by looking like superwoman but I learnt to say no and concentrated on looking after me!”

Exercise, healthy eating and adequate sleep contribute to well-being. Some women choose to use complementary and holistic approaches to health. The BC Cancer Agency offers nutrition, relaxation and vocational rehabilitation programs. Local community centres and gyms may offer yoga, meditation, exercise and relaxation programs.

Some women find that becoming active in the breast cancer community at the local, provincial, or national level or volunteering in other community causes is helpful. Getting back to previously enjoyed activities or exploring new ones contributes to health and wellbeing.

These are only suggestions found by other survivors to be useful. Feel comfortable taking the necessary time to develop a lifestyle that works for you. Choices are yours!

“Live in the present and make plans for the future”

BRITISH COLUMBIA & YUKON RESOURCES

INFORMATION SOURCES

There are many information services and resources available to you including:

- BC Cancer Agency Library 1.888.675.8001 x 8001
- BC Cancer Agency, Hereditary Cancer Program
1.800.663.3333 x 672198
- Canadian Cancer Society, Cancer Information Service
1.888.939.3333
- Community Nursing Stations
- Public Health Units
- Public libraries

OTHER EXCELLENT RESOURCES INCLUDE:

Books

- *After breast cancer: a common-sense guide to life after treatment* by H.H. Schnipper & L.E. Schnipper (2006)
- *After breast cancer: answers to the questions you're afraid to ask* by Musa Mayer (2003)
- *Dancing in limbo: making sense of life after cancer* by G. Halvorson-Boyd & L.K. Hunter (1995)
- *Woman Cancer Sex* by Anne Katz (2009)
- *Your brain after chemo* by Dan Silverman and Idelle Davidson (2009)
- *Living well beyond breast cancer* by Marisa Weiss and Ellen Weiss (2010)
- *Picking up the pieces: moving forward after surviving cancer* by Sherri Magee & Kathy Scalzo (2006)
- *Exercise for health: an exercise guide for breast cancer survivors* by J. Vallance & K.S. Courneya (2008)

Newsletter

- **Abreast & the Rest** - This newsletter is no longer in production after Fall 2012. However all issues are on-line at www.abreastandtherest.ca

PROGRAMS, SERVICES & WEBSITES

Abreast in a Boat Society

Dragon boat survivor teams, for team locations in BC call

1.888.939.3333

www.abreastinaboat.com

BC Cancer Agency

Relaxation programs, patient and family counselling, support groups, nutritional services, vocational services

Abbotsford	604.851.4710	1.877.547.3777
Kelowna	250.712.3900	1.888.563.7773
Prince George	250.645.7300	1.855.775.7300
Surrey	604.930.2098	1.800.523.2885
Vancouver	604.877.6000	1.800.663.3333
Victoria	250.519.5500	1.800.670.3322

CancerConnection, Canadian Cancer Society

A free service which will match you with a trained volunteer who has had a similar cancer experience. There is also a secure supportive web community as well.

1.888.939.3333

www.cancerconnection.ca

Cancer Information Service, Canadian Cancer Society,

Toll free information services about cancer and community resources

1.888.939.3333

www.bc.cancer.ca

Canadian Breast Cancer Network

The voice of survivors in Canada and website reference list to resources on various topics

1.800.685.8820

www.cbcn.ca

Cancer Chat Canada

Professionally-led online support for Canadians affected by cancer

www.cancerchatcanada.ca

Memorial Sloan Kettering

Provides an easy to search database on natural health products and information on individual therapies.

www.mskcc.org/mskcc

Rethink Breast Cancer

Supporting young adults affected by breast cancer through education, support and research.

1.866.738.4465

www.rethinkbreastcancer.com

Breast Reconstruction Program

Provides information on reconstruction practices in BC

www.breastreconstruction.vch.ca

NOTES

This guide was created by the Greater Vancouver Regional Advisory Group of the Alliance for Breast Cancer Information & Support, BC & Yukon. This group consists of those who have personally experienced breast cancer and the effects of treatments, BC Cancer Agency professionals and hospital health care providers. A special thank you to the various dragon boat teams who assisted in this effort.

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