

BREAST CANCER YOUNG WOMEN

Contrary to the western world where breast cancer is common after the age of 60 years, in India, the highest incidence of breast cancer is between the ages of 25-50 years; at least two decades earlier! We have absolutely no statistics in India about the precise number of younger women being diagnosed with breast cancer.

Being diagnosed with breast cancer at a young age can be a huge shock & a very agonizing experience. The thought of having cancer may never have crossed the young person's mind as it is a common perception that breast cancer occurs in older people

A range of emotions set in. One may find it very difficult to take in the diagnosis and very often many women question if it's really true. Younger women diagnosed with breast cancer report a range of complex emotions including feeling anxious, angry and frightened. These are all common and natural emotions. Everyone responds differently and one may have some or all these feelings at different stages of treatment. Issues faced by younger women faced with breast cancer are much different to those faced by older women.

IMPORTANCE OF COUNSELING

Cancer does not just affect the body. It affects the mind body and soul. Just treating the physical being does not complete cancer treatment. Cancer diagnosis can leave a host of problems in its wake, particularly in younger women. Physical, financial and emotional hardships often persist after diagnosis and treatment. Hence counseling is an extremely important component of breast cancer care as patients and their relatives are better informed, better prepared, and more importantly, feel more in control at every stage of their treatment.

Counseling involves discussion about the diagnosis and various treatment options by the Specialist in a sensitive and supportive environment. Equally, adequate psychological and emotional support is given during the Counselling Sessions that takes care of individual needs of patients and their families affected with breast cancer.

In a younger woman with breast cancer, there are bound to be many questions and it is crucial that they are addressed well.

Right from the point of diagnosis throughout treatment and beyond in the face of adversity called 'cancer', a survivor comes across many difficulties. It is vitally important to draw upon Courage, Determination & Perseverance to fight this disease as 'inner strength' is critical in the victory against cancer.

What are the possible questions that one might want to ask the Specialist?

One should feel free to ask questions to the Specialist relating to various treatment options. They might include

Why is this the best treatment for me?

Are there any options?

What are the possible side effects?

Are there any short term & long term complications?

How will these treatments impact on everyday life?

It is the duty of the Specialist to clarify questions posed in an unhurried manner in simple easy to understand language.

Coping with the diagnosis

Speaking to other people

Talking to people about diagnosis of cancer can be very difficult. Although talking about it can be difficult at the beginning, it can make it easier for the people around to offer help and support if one opens up. If the newly diagnosed breast cancer patient has children, deciding what to tell them may be one of the most difficult challenges. Children may imagine the worst, so it is important to be realistic yet reassuring. There is no one right way of speaking to children. It depends on their ages and family situation

Stress

There are various self-help techniques that should be advised by a trained counselor. Techniques of relaxation such as Meditation, regular physical activity do help reduce stress levels

Diagnosis of breast cancer during pregnancy

Some women are diagnosed with breast cancer during pregnancy or shortly after giving birth – the happiest times can suddenly turn for the worse. There is no conclusive evidence that breast cancer during pregnancy is more aggressive than breast cancer occurring at other times. However, for some women there may be a delay in diagnosis because of the difficulty of detecting a cancer in the breast at this time. The treatment offered to pregnant women will depend on the stage of breast cancer and stage of pregnancy when diagnosed. It is important for the treating team to liaise with the Obstetrician looking after the patient. Most breast cancer treatments can be given during pregnancy. In some circumstances, it may be necessary to terminate pregnancy

Can I become pregnant again?

Fertility issues

Some of the treatments offered during breast cancer treatment can have an impact on fertility. Women just diagnosed may not raise the issue of fertility with their doctor because they will be overwhelmed by the diagnosis, or they are not aware that cancer treatments can impair fertility or they do not want children. If one has not started or completed the family, preserving fertility for that individual may be a priority and it is the duty of the doctors involved in treating the patient to bring this up with the patient and her spouse and refer the lady to a Fertility specialist before embarking on breast cancer treatment.

It may be possible to have fertility treatment to freeze embryos or in some cases eggs for use in the future after completing breast cancer treatment.

As a general guide, it is advisable to wait for two to three years following treatment before becoming pregnant. This is to allow body time to recover and also because the risk of the cancer coming back is highest in the first two - three years after diagnosis. Waiting for this long may not be appropriate for everyone. The advice varies from individual to individual and expert advice is essential before planning a family after being diagnosed with breast cancer.

Contraception

It is important to consider using contraception. Hormonal contraception such as the pill is not usually recommended for women who have had breast cancer as the hormones in the contraceptive pill might stimulate breast cancer recurrence. The best option would be using a barrier method such as condoms.

Body image

Breast cancer treatments can sometimes change the way the body looks. Self-confidence diminishes considerably & one may be very self-conscious about going out in public. Even simple things like using public change areas at clothes shops and swimming pools may be an issue. Counseling is extremely important for advice and support at this difficult phase.

Menopausal side effects

Some treatments for breast cancer cause side effects usually associated with the menopause. Chemotherapy & many hormonal drugs may affect the quality of life. One may experience symptoms such as hot flushes, hair thinning, night sweats, vaginal dryness, fatigue, poor concentration and mood swings. They can have a considerable effect on how one feels. It is important to talk to the Specialist and early referral to a gynecologist may help resolve some of the issues.

Hair loss

Hair loss can be one of the most distressing side effects of breast cancer treatment. Advice regarding this issue and even fitting with a wig before commencing treatment can help restore self-confidence significantly. Some women prefer to go to Tirupati and go bald before commencing treatment. One of my patients said to me that she was 'bald and beautiful' – a great sense of humour. I must say for a 23-year-old lady to say such words – all these are effects and results of good counseling. Preparing the mind is half the battle won.

Breast reconstruction

Surgery for breast cancer is likely to affect how the breast looks and feels. Some women who are recommended to have a mastectomy (removal of all the breast and nipple) find it harder than women who are offered breast conserving surgery. All women must be counseled regarding options for reconstruction, a glaringly absent feature in India for the vast majority of women undergoing mastectomy. Reconstruction can be an important part of treatment that helps emotional recovery and wellbeing and treating doctors must take this factor into consideration during counseling. Partner's views and choices must be taken into consideration whilst planning breast reconstruction.

Sexuality

Women find that their sex life changes significantly both during and after treatment. Many feel insecure about sexual relationships. Pain/numbness in the breast/chest wall area/discomfort following surgery and radiotherapy may limit intimacy. On the other hand, chemotherapy might reduce your sexual desire.

Vaginal dryness is another major issue. Early menopause due to effects of chemotherapy drugs and infertility also affects sexuality.

Partners talking amongst themselves & advice from a Gynecologist may be able to offer some practical solutions.

Many women find that their partners may temporarily lose interest in them sexually or even reject them. This can be particularly difficult to deal with at a time when one needs all the reassurance in the world. Counseling is essential under these circumstances.

Diet

Advice regarding eating a healthy diet can help significantly. Regular Physical activity has many benefits relieving some side effects of treatment, particularly regaining shoulder and arm movement after surgery

Over estimating the risk of developing recurrence and over reacting – I refer to it as ‘Angelina Jolie effect’

Some young women with breast cancer tend to overestimate their risk for getting cancer in the opposite healthy breast - sometimes driving them to have that breast removed.

Despite evidence that having the procedure (contralateral prophylactic mastectomy) does not improve survival rates, growing numbers of women are requesting for this procedure, more so after Angelina Jolie’s bilateral prophylactic mastectomy done to prevent breast cancer in view of very high risk of developing breast cancer as a result of strong family history.

Risk should be conveyed by the doctor in simple easy to understand language. Better communication is needed to reassure women that there is no survival benefit in having a prophylactic mastectomy to the other breast

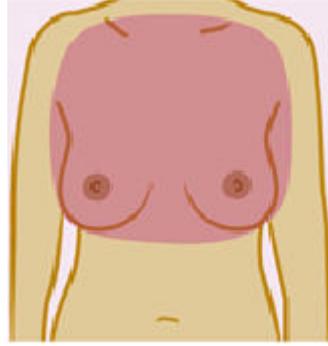
Can cancer come back?

Younger women diagnosed with breast cancer have this question more worrisome as they are still very young. The treatments offered are aimed at reducing the chance of recurrence. Most will not have recurrence if detected early. However, some do develop recurrence. I tell my patients to focus on being positive & counsel them in that direction. I always believe that counseling is 50% of treatment. An unprepared mind will not deal with the treatment effectively. There is an unexplained benefit of treatment working better in patients who are positive throughout their treatment & beyond.

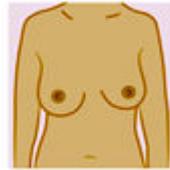
Finally

It is important to be ‘breast aware’ after completing treatment

Check all parts of your breasts, your armpits and up to your collarbone for changes.



- a change in size-it may be that one breast has become noticeably larger or noticeably lower
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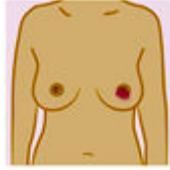
Courtesy: Breast Cancer Care, UK

- a nipple has become inverted (pulled in) or changed its position or shape



Courtesy: Breast Cancer Care, UK

- a rash on or around the nipple



Courtesy: Breast Cancer Care, UK

- discharge from one or both nipples



Courtesy: Breast Cancer Care, UK

- puckering or dimpling of the skin



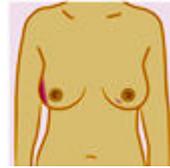
Courtesy: Breast Cancer Care, UK

- a swelling under your armpit or around your collarbone (where the lymph nodes are)



Courtesy: Breast Cancer Care, UK

- a lump or thickening in your breast that feels different from the rest of the breast tissue



Courtesy: Breast Cancer Care, UK

- Constant pain in one part of your breast or in your armpit.



Courtesy: Breast Cancer Care, UK

One size does not fit all. Every woman, more so, younger women diagnosed with breast cancer have a number of issues to deal with. A flexible tailor made approach with abundant counseling will help young women cope with the treatment, and equally, bounce back to life after treatment.