

Difficult Journey: How I Survived Breast Cancer

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I am Dr. Samta, a gynaecologist by profession, I was detected to have stage 2 breast cancer about 17 years ago when I was 53 years old. I was treated with surgery, followed by chemotherapy and radiation therapy in 2004-05. I am now leading a normal healthy and productive working life.

It was a difficult and unpleasant experience, to say the least. My objective behind narrating details of my experience dealing with the disease is to make women of today more aware of breast cancer, which is on the top in the list of cancers affecting women. While I give a message of hope and success, I do not want to downplay the emotional and physical difficulties experienced during this difficult journey.

I was enjoying a holiday at Horsley Hills with my family when I suspected something is seriously wrong. I happened to look in the mirror while bathing and I noticed that nipple of my left breast was drooping. As I tried to correct it, I felt a big lemon sized lump just behind the nipple. Being a doctor myself, I immediately knew that I was in for some serious trouble. I decided not to disclose it to the family then, as all were in a vacation mode.

After reaching home, I told my husband, Dr. Govind what I suspected. He told me to immediately seek an appointment with Dr. Mohana Wamsy, the surgical oncologist. Same day by 5 PM, through sonography and Fine Needle Aspiration Cytology (FNAC), stage 2 breast cancer was confirmed.

Till this time, we were in denial and everyone was trying to avoid the truth, hoping it was not cancer. After our worst fear was confirmed, we were devastated. In particular, my school going daughter took the news very hard, as if it was my end.

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However, we had to accept the truth and deal with the situation head on. Without any further waste of time, my surgery was scheduled. On the day of the surgery (4th September 2004), by the grace of my Deity Shree Gajanan Maharaj, I walked into the operation theatre without the wheelchair, with fear and hope in mind. My surgery lasted for 6-7 hours involving left mastectomy with left axillary clearance of 17 lymph nodes.

Surgery went well. After 48 hours of my surgery, I went to my hospital to attend to my OPD patients. Surgery was followed by cancer chemotherapy. I continued my routine till after my second dose of chemotherapy. Chemo process was exceptionally tough for me to handle. Though a necessary part of the treatment process, chemotherapy affects hair, mouth lining, all blood components, intestinal cells etc. Inability to eat, constant fatigue and lack of energy are common. There is a serious decline in body's ability to fight infections while receiving chemotherapy. Due to lack of immunity, one becomes prone to a host of infections, sometimes called opportunistic infections.

And I went through it all! Many times, I felt that my body was losing the battle. I had postoperative infections, high fever, poor appetite, and lack of energy. There was a serious consideration to forego the remaining 4 cycles of chemo; a suggestion to which my oncologist concurred. However, I was not ready to give up and decided to go ahead with the remaining cycles. I clearly remember how the anesthetist and my surgeon would sit by my side during the administration of chemotherapy, in readiness to handle respiratory or cardiac arrest that could occur. My last chemo cycle was in February 2005. After that I received local radiation therapy that was given 5 days a week, for a total 28 sessions, which finished in April 2005.

It took a fair amount of time to recover from ill effects of therapies. By the year 2008, (3 years after completion of treatment), I started taking full loads of duties in the hospital. I sailed through this dreaded disease and by the grace of Almighty, today, I am hale and hearty. I could not have gone through this rough ride without the help and moral support of my family and friends. Thanks to them, and my physicians who provided such compassionate and scientifically sound care, I am alive and doing well personally as well as professionally.



Perhaps no one knows all reasons as to why breast cancer occurs in some women and spares others. To my mind it is basically change in life style which includes few or no children, no or less breast feeding, late menopause etc. that increases the risk of breast cancer. These factors expose breast tissues to excessive and continuous estrogen exposure which may increase the risk of breast cancer. Regardless, early detection is important as chances of survival increase manifold with early diagnosis and treatment.

One should stay alert as breast cancer is number one malignancy in women. My advice in this regard is as follows:

- a. Spend one minute each day to look for the changes associated with breast cancer - size, shape, nipple position etc.
- b. Listen to your body. It gives you signal. Do not neglect or delay seeking help if something does not feel right.
- c. Learn self-examination of breast and armpits (ideally to be done in front of the mirror). Self-examination should be done once a month through palpitation.
- d. Mammography starting at the age of 40. Frequency will depend upon the risk factors involved. Genetic counselling will determine the risk level.
- e. Adopt a healthy lifestyle, monitor your body weight, and say no to alcohol and smoking.

Unfortunately, if one gets breast cancer, my advice would be:

- A. Act fast, and consult an oncologist. If doubt remains, consider a second opinion. But once treatment begins, follow the advice of the doctor.
- B. Complete the charted treatment in designated time, without any delay as much as possible
- C. Body will need a high protein diet for strength and for repairs of wear and tear.
- D. Wear a mask, avoid contact with people during treatment.
- E. Have faith in God and your doctor.
- F. Keep your morale high, be brave and positive

Last but not the least, family plays a very important role during and after treatment. In my case, my husband, Dr. Govind, children, Dr. Bharat and Chitra, other friends and relatives especially Ramesh ji, provided much needed support to me. Their encouraging words, empathy and caring attitude gave healing touch to my wounds.

My sincere thanks to Dr. Usha, my classmate in medical college who encouraged me to write about my unforgettable lifetime experience with this disease for the magazine Samvedana.

I dedicate my write up to my mother Smt. Saritadevi Shravagi who is in eternal peace.

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Advisor's Notes

There is some disagreement among experts on screening mammography. Readers may have noticed some variation in the articles and commentary above in this context. The most accepted guidelines for this purpose come from The US Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) which recommends the following:

- *Perform mammography every 2 years between the ages of age 50 and 74.*
- *Perform individualized screening for 40-49 years old women after a thorough discussion on the potential risks and benefits of mammography, breast cancer risk, and patient's preference.*
- *Breast cancer screening is not recommended for women younger than 40 years or older than 75 years.*

Dr. Praveer Jain