

This booklet belongs to:

Overcoming Your Fears of Breast Cancer Treatment



Developed for you by
breastcancer.org
The world's leading
Internet-based nonprofit
breast cancer organization

Overcoming Your Fears of Breast Cancer Treatment

Hearing your doctor say “You have breast cancer” is scary and overwhelming.

Your mind can shut down and go numb. You might think this diagnosis means you’re about to die. (It doesn’t!) Or you might worry about how to tell your kids, or how you’ll ever be able to make it through treatment.

You’re not crazy to worry about these things. These are all normal thoughts and feelings. But it’s also very important to deal with your fears, worries, and concerns so you can go ahead and get the treatments you need.

The purpose of this booklet is to help you get over the fears that can stop you from getting the best breast cancer treatment for YOU.

This booklet is divided
into two sections:

Section A) Tips for overcoming general fears about breast cancer treatments

Section B) Tips for overcoming specific treatment fears

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Introduction: What You May Fear

You are about to start breast cancer treatment that will help you become healthier. This treatment is a way to fight back at your fears about the cancer.

But the thought of breast cancer treatment itself can stir up many feelings:

- You may be afraid of treatment side effects.
- You may be anxious about whether you can work at your job or care for your family during your treatment.
- If you have young children, you may be worried about how to tell them about what's happening to you.
- You may be concerned that the treatment won't work and you should have chosen a different one.
- You may worry about how you'll make time for treatment or how you'll manage getting back and forth to your appointments.
- You may be afraid of being unable to care for yourself and needing help from others.
- You may worry about how you are going to pay for treatment.

It's important to deal with your fears

It's normal to have all these feelings. Give yourself permission to feel them. Feeling nervous about treatment won't affect how well the treatment works. But it can affect how well YOU feel, function, and connect with those around you.

Feeling too much worry or anxiety can:

- stop you from keeping doctor appointments, getting tests, or receiving the treatment you need;
- make it hard to think and speak clearly, concentrate, read, and remember;
- get in the way of your exercising, sleeping, or eating well; and
- keep you from connecting to people and getting the support you need.

It's important for you to get help in overcoming your worries so they don't interfere with your care. This booklet will give you tips on how to work through your fears, worries, and concerns about breast cancer treatment.

For more information go to:

www.breastcancer.org

Section A: Overcoming General Fears

1. Take your time

There are many treatments that work against breast cancer. But trying to choose the best ones can take time:

- You may need time to get a second opinion from a doctor, or just to think about your options.
- Don't feel pressured to decide right away. A few weeks usually won't make a difference in the cancer itself.
- Waiting a few weeks until you feel more comfortable with your treatment decisions can make the whole process much less scary.

Expert Tip:

“When you're dealing with breast cancer you often feel out of control. Not knowing what it all means, what's going to happen next, and what you can do to help yourself can feel very uncomfortable.

“The best way to get back in control is to know what to expect, who's going to help you, how to contact them, and what you can do. It also helps to have a full treatment plan. Once you have these things, and get going with treatment, you'll feel so much better.”

— *Marisa Weiss, breast cancer doctor,
President and Founder of breastcancer.org*

Give yourself time to heal

You may worry that after treatment you won't be able to get back to all your favorite activities.

Getting back your strength and energy can take time. But if you give yourself the time you need to recover and heal, you'll be able to get back to much of the activity and enjoyment in life that you had before you started.

"I urge all of my patients to 'take time to heal.' They need it, and they deserve it."

— *Kim Blackwell, breast cancer doctor*

For more information go to:

www.breastcancer.org

Section A: Overcoming General Fears

2. Reach out to others

You are not alone in having fears or worries about breast cancer treatment. You also shouldn't be alone in dealing with them:

- Try talking about your concerns with your doctors, nurses, family, or friends.
- Ask your doctor about an experienced counselor, or a breast cancer survivor hotline, in your area.
- Talk to a religious or spiritual leader in your community.



- Talk to women who have been through the same treatment you are going to have. You can find them by word of mouth or by joining online chat groups or discussion boards, like the ones at www.breastcancer.org.
- Join a support group for women with breast cancer. In a support group you can talk about your feelings with other women dealing with the same issues. Many hospitals and cancer centers offer support groups. Try to find one that is appropriate for your stage of cancer.



For more information go to:

www.breastcancer.org

Section A: Overcoming General Fears

3. Get household help

Breast cancer treatment can make you tired and unable to do all your usual activities.

But many people are eager to help:

- Religious groups and community organizations often have volunteers who can help you with childcare, meals, or other daily needs.
- Friends and neighbors can help fill your freezer with precooked meals for those days when your energy is low. Or they can pitch in with food shopping, car-pooling, or childcare.
- When you give others the chance to help, they benefit and you benefit. You get their much-needed help, and they feel good about being able to help you.

“You have to open up and let other people help you. The way I was able to do it was to realize that it helps them to help you. So you’re actually doing them a favor by letting them help you!” — *Marilynn*

To thank someone special for helping you, send a special email card, like these (available free at www.breastcancer.org):



For more information go to:

www.breastcancer.org

Section A: Overcoming General Fears

4. Get the facts

Cancer is a scary word to most of us. But keep in mind that breast cancer is not a death sentence. The treatments available now allow many women to survive the disease and live long, productive lives.

“When I was a kid no one said the word cancer out loud — it was whispered. So it was spooky for me to say I had cancer the first few times. I had to demystify cancer to lessen my fear.” — *Wendy*

What you are afraid of is usually worse than what actually happens. This is because your mind often assumes the worst. Don't let your imagination take over. Fears can be like a child's “monster under the bed” — when you shine the light of information on them, they tend to lessen or disappear.



Arm yourself with facts about your situation.

“Preparation is the key, especially with chemotherapy. Prior to my treatment, I met with a woman who had just gone through chemotherapy for breast cancer. She told me what to expect and what to do about it. It was helpful talking to someone who actually experienced what I was about to experience.” — Dale

Keep in mind that a lot of the facts you gather will be good news:

- Breast cancer treatment is more effective today than it was 5 or 10 years ago.
- Surgery and radiation not only protect your life by getting rid of the breast cancer. Surgery and radiation can also help you keep your breast. Plastic surgery can help rebuild it if it needs to be removed.
- New drugs can help control the uncomfortable side effects of chemotherapy and other treatments.

For more information go to:

www.breastcancer.org

Section A: Overcoming General Fears

5. Get help gathering information

A recent diagnosis of breast cancer can stir up many feelings that may make it hard for you to take in information. You may leave the doctor's office feeling confused or worried that you haven't understood everything you were told.

You may need a "listener."

Next time bring someone with you who is a good listener and can take notes.

Here are some things a good listener can help with:

- Asking the hard questions.
- Filling out the forms.
- Discussing the next steps.

A small tape recorder is another way to take in information. Ask the doctor if you can record the session so you can listen again later on.

You may also find it helpful to use a family member or friend as a "reader." A reader can give you just the information you need in a way that is easy for you to take in.

"My husband and kids went on the Internet and filtered the information for me."

— Lisa

Good sources of information on breast cancer and its treatment are:

- Your doctor and nurse.
- The Treatment section of www.breastcancer.org.
- The booklets “Your Guide to the Breast Cancer Pathology Report” and “Your Guide to Breast Cancer Treatment” put out by breastcancer.org. You can order them for free at www.breastcancer.org.
- The National Cancer Institute’s Cancer Information Service, which can be reached at 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237) or at www.nci.nih.gov.

Expert Tip:

“Unfortunately, when it comes to illness, other people feel too ready to give you advice. They will tell you what their neighbor or aunt did. You need to filter that stuff out and deal with the reputable health care providers that you have chosen. They know your particular situation and what is best for you.”

— Roz Kleban, social worker
specializing in breast cancer care

For more information go to:

www.breastcancer.org

Section A: Overcoming General Fears

6. Put faith in your treatment

A common anxiety women have about breast cancer treatment is that the treatment they're getting may not be the best one. You may worry that your treatment isn't working, or that you should get the same treatment your friend got.

You can ease this anxiety by knowing:

- Your situation is unique — a treatment that worked for the type of cancer your friend had may not be best for the type that you have.
- Sometimes there is more than one “right way” to go — the treatment you've chosen is probably at least as effective as your friend's.
- You make the best treatment decisions that you can along the way. If your situation changes, you can change your treatment to better suit your new situation.

“I got through my treatment by thinking:
‘This is going to make me well.’”

—Marilynn

Work and Money Concerns

Some women find they don't have the energy for their jobs during breast cancer treatment. Others welcome the distraction of work, even if they have lower-than-usual energy.

"I was tired working while I had my radiation treatment, but I knew I would be just as tired if I stayed home with my three kids." — Andrea

If you work outside the home, let your employer know what's happening so you can plan your schedule and take the time off that you may need.

Talk to your employer about the possibility of not working during your treatment, or working part-time or from home. Find out about getting disability coverage.

If you are worried about paying for your treatment, talk to your doctor, nurse, and social worker. They can help you find coverage through a government program or special funds offered by hospitals or drug companies for those in need.

For more information go to:

www.breastcancer.org

Section A: Overcoming General Fears

7. Get help dealing with stress and anxiety

There are some special techniques for reducing stress and anxiety:

- Massage
- Yoga
- Deep breathing
- Prayer
- Meditation
- Visualization (for example: imagining yourself in a beautiful place, or imagining your immune cells gobbling up cancer cells)

Many hospitals, health or cancer support centers, and community organizations offer workshops for some of these relaxation techniques.

If these stress-reducers don't work for you, speak with your doctor about various medications that might help ease your anxiety.

"I'm someone who never took an aspirin before. But now I'll take whatever my doctor prescribes that can help me calm down and go to sleep." — Sharon

8. Celebrate each step

Try to see each step you take during your treatment as an accomplishment worth celebrating. Give yourself credit for all your hard work at getting better. Reward yourself with a special treat, like dinner out, music, new jewelry, or whatever else you would enjoy.

“It’s important to look back and see how far you’ve come. And celebrate!”

— Marilyn



For more information go to:

www.breastcancer.org

Section B:

Overcoming Specific Treatment Fears

1. Dealing with surgery fears

Surgery for any condition can be scary.

You may worry about:

- the pain and discomfort it might cause;
- how long the recovery period will be; and
- how you will cope with daily tasks until you feel better.

One way to deal with those fears is to find out what to expect from surgery before you have it. This will help you prepare for any changes that might happen afterwards:

- If pain is expected, make sure to get any pain-relief medicines that you might need.
- If you leave the hospital with elastic or adhesive bandages and a drain, get instructions for how to manage them.
- If you will be unable to drive for several days, plan to get help with errands.
- If reaching and lifting will be restricted, make sure that everything you will need is within easy reach.
- If you'll be taking time off from work, talk to your supervisor about how to get your workload covered in your absence.

Surgery Concerns

Can surgery make breast cancer spread?

No. Some women worry that surgery will make breast cancer spread by cutting loose cancer cells, or by exposing them to the open air. But these factors do not make cancer spread.

Will I need a blood transfusion if I have breast cancer surgery?

No. Only a small amount of blood is lost during breast cancer surgery. A blood transfusion is not usually needed.

Before I leave the hospital, what written instructions should I get from my doctor?

- What to take for any pain, discomfort, nausea, or constipation you might have.
- How to manage a drain, stitches, and bandages.
- How much lifting, driving, and other physical activities you can do.
- When you can go back to work.
- When you should call your doctor.
For example: if you see any new swelling or redness, or if you develop a fever.

For more information go to:

www.breastcancer.org

Section B: Overcoming Specific Treatment Fears

Body image concerns

Breast cancer surgery may also make you worry about your body image and about your intimate life. You may worry that after breast surgery you won't be sexually attractive or that you won't feel sexy. Some women worry about losing their partners or not being able to find partners in the future.

Here are some tips to help with those worries:

- Share your concerns with your partner.
- Don't assume that your partner shares your view of your body.
- Buy yourself lingerie that looks and feels sexy.
- Take it step by step. Don't rush.
- Set the stage. When you're in the mood for intimacy, let your partner know with the right lighting, music, and clothing.



Expert Tip:

“Losing part of your body is sad and traumatic, but it doesn’t change why people love you. If you assume that your partner will be turned off by the surgery, you will be less eager to start sex. And your partner won’t start it because he or she is afraid of hurting you after your surgery. But you may misinterpret this as rejection. That is why it is so important to talk about this.”

— Roz Kleban, social worker
specializing in breast cancer care

Section B:

Overcoming Specific Treatment Fears

2. Dealing with chemotherapy fears

Chemotherapy is the treatment that sounds the scariest to many women. Before chemotherapy, you may worry about:

- losing your hair;
- how your family, friends, and co-workers will react to your hair loss;
- having nausea and vomiting; and
- going into menopause early and not being able to have children.

“The most frightening time for me was BEFORE chemo started, when I didn’t know what to expect. Once the treatments actually started, I said: ‘Oh, so that’s what it’s like. I can deal with that.’ And I did.”

— *Debbie*

To deal with these worries, find out all about chemotherapy before you start:

- Talk to your doctor or nurse about medicines to relieve nausea and vomiting.
- If your chemotherapy is going to cause hair loss, you might want to cut your hair short and buy a wig, hat, scarf, or other head covering before starting treatment.
- If you plan to have children after your treatment, ask your doctor what your risk of infertility might be. Find out if there is an effective chemotherapy option that is least likely to cause infertility. You also may want to consult a fertility expert before starting treatment.
- Ask your doctor or nurse for advice on how to deal with menopausal symptoms if they occur.
- Get your doctor's and nurse's phone numbers in case you have emergency questions.

"I was so worried about losing my hair, but once it was gone I didn't care — I liked my wig, got compliments about it, and the kids got used to it." — *Tricia*

For more information go to:

www.breastcancer.org

Section B: Overcoming Specific Treatment Fears

3. Dealing with hormone therapy fears

Some women can take hormone therapy to reduce their risk of breast cancer recurrence. (This is NOT the same as hormone replacement therapy that some women take after menopause.)

Tamoxifen is the most commonly used hormone therapy for women with hormone-receptor-positive breast cancer. Many more women are helped by tamoxifen than are harmed by it. It can cause hot flashes and other menopausal symptoms, but these tend to lessen over time. The risk of serious side effects, like uterine cancer, blood clots, and strokes, is very small.

Most of the side effects women worry about are actually not caused by tamoxifen. Tamoxifen is not likely to cause weight gain or permanent menopause.

“Tamoxifen is my life insurance. I will do whatever I can to keep the cancer from coming back.” — Angela

Another type of hormone treatment is aromatase inhibitors. This type of treatment is used in post-menopausal women with hormone-receptor-positive breast cancer. Short-term study results show this type of treatment may be more effective than tamoxifen in preventing breast cancer recurrence with fewer side effects.

Aromatase inhibitors tend to cause fewer hot flashes. They also do not have the risk of uterine cancer and stroke. But they do have a small increased risk of bone loss.

Many of the side effects of hormone therapy can be improved by lifestyle changes, supplements, and drugs. For example: exercise, diet changes, and drugs can help with hot flashes. Exercise, calcium, vitamin D, and drugs can help with bone loss.

Although doctors recommend that you take hormone treatments for five years for early disease, don't worry that you're trapped in a five-year commitment with no way out. You and your doctor can re-evaluate the role of different treatments all along the way.

For more information go to:

www.breastcancer.org

Section B:

Overcoming Specific Treatment Fears

4. Dealing with radiation therapy fears

It's scary to think about radiation being directed at your body. And it's hard to imagine that something that can be so harmful when it's used as a weapon can also do something good like lower the chance of the breast cancer coming back.

It's important to realize that the kind of radiation used to treat breast cancer is very different from the types of radiation used to make weapons. Radiation therapy is also very precisely directed only to the area that needs treatment, leaving the rest of you alone.

You may worry that radiation therapy will:

- make you lose your hair;
- make you nauseated;
- make you radioactive; or
- trigger a new cancer.

But none of these side effects occurs with standard radiation therapy for breast cancer.

Radiation is usually given once a day, 5 days a week, over 5–7 weeks. Sometimes it may be given twice a day over one week. Many women also worry about how they will manage to get to all of their treatments.

If you miss a treatment because of bad weather or an emergency, you can make it up at the end. Most treatment centers are open all day, so you can be treated before or after work, or during the day when children are in school. If you can't get to the hospital yourself, ask for help with transportation.

Radiation therapy is not free of side effects. The most common ones are tiredness, skin irritation, swelling, stiffness, and soreness. But you can ask your doctor or nurse for remedies to lessen these effects.

“I wasn't afraid until the first treatment. I just got uneasy about having radiation aimed near my heart. But my doctor talked to me and she helped me understand why it was safe and how much effort went into targeting the dose where it belongs and away from normal tissue. It's important to learn to trust both your doctor and the treatment process.”

— *Marjorie*

For more information go to:

www.breastcancer.org

Section B: Overcoming Specific Treatment Fears

5. Dealing with test anxiety

After breast cancer treatment, most women have follow-up mammograms and blood work. Some women also have body scans. A test with normal results can be very reassuring.

But the fear that the tests might show signs of cancer is hard to manage. This anxiety continues until the test results come back.

Sometimes, a test shows an area of concern with no definite abnormality. This uncertainty can make you even more nervous. Other tests can be done to help figure out if there is a problem or if everything is OK.

Even after the tests are done, you might not have a definite answer. You may still feel uncertain. Talk to your doctor about this.

Make a plan to help get an answer. This might mean:

- getting a second opinion;
- coming back in a month;
- getting another test in a few months; or
- getting a biopsy.

Here are some ways to help relieve test anxiety:

- Arrange with your doctor to get the test results quickly. Try to schedule important tests early in the week so you don't have to wait over a weekend for the results.
- Find a mammography center where the radiologist will give you the results before you leave.
- Have a friend or family member go with you to your test appointment.
- Keep in mind that no matter what the tests show, your doctor can help you understand the results and make a plan to deal with them.
- When anxiety hits, shift the power of your mind over to the positive. Meditate, do deep breathing exercises, pray, imagine yourself in a relaxing place, or try to think encouraging thoughts.
- Take anti-anxiety medications prescribed by your doctor, if necessary.

For more information go to:

www.breastcancer.org

Conclusion: You Can Get Through It!

Like most women still recovering from the shock of a breast cancer diagnosis, you know you need treatment. But you may not feel ready or able to deal with what lies ahead.

All the fears and unknowns can stop you in your tracks. But it's important to keep moving forward. Remember: there is only one of you, and YOU are worth fighting for. And focus on your goal: becoming as healthy as possible.

Sometimes it's hard to find the strength to do it all. But with the right preparation, support, and mind-set, you can make it through your treatment. We all have inner strengths that we aren't aware of until we face a big challenge such as breast cancer.

"If someone had told me a month ago that I was going to go through two surgeries in two weeks, I would have thought, 'There's no way I'm going to be able to deal with it.' But you have to realize that you'll rise to the challenge. Not because you're better than anyone else, but because it's what you have to do." — *Melissa*

You DO have a future:

“I didn't choose this disease and I wasn't going to let it control me. I had a good life before, and this bad thing wasn't going to change my life for me. I was going to make life good again. That was 20 years ago — and it *has* been good!”

— *Caroline*

“I live one day at a time —
I value each and every day.” — *Sarah*

Expert Tip:

“Think and plan for your future. Don't let fear stop you. You do have a future. Plan what you want to do for yourself, your family, vacations, retirement. It's reasonable to hope that your future will be years and years of a good life.”

— *Marisa Weiss, breast cancer doctor,
President and Founder of breastcancer.org*

My Contact List

Feeling out of control can make you feel scared, alone, angry, and upset. Knowing whom to call when you need help and support can make a big difference.

Fill in the names and numbers of the key people on YOUR support team, and carry them with you so you can get help whenever you need it.

Medical Support

Surgeon / surgical nurse:

Call this person with questions about surgery, the results of surgery (pathology report), and the next step in your care. This person will also help with any side effects from surgery.

Medical oncologist / medical oncology nurse:

Call this person with questions about chemotherapy, hormonal, and immune treatment. This person will also help with any side effects from these treatments.

Radiation oncologist / radiation oncology nurse:

Call this person with questions about radiation treatments. This person will also help with any side effects from these treatments.

Radiology library / radiology department

Pathology lab / pathology department:

Call to schedule and pick up test results.

Primary care doctor:

You may ask this person to help you understand and keep track of information from all the other doctors.

Family and Friends

For general support I can call:

For help with meals I can call:

For help with the kids I can call:

For help making appointments I can call:

For rides to the hospital I can call:

Someone who will come with me to my appointments is:

Emergency Numbers

The number of the closest emergency room:

My doctor gave me this number to call in an emergency:

Find the help and support you need

breastcancer.org is dedicated to providing you with information and support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Go to our web site, at www.breastcancer.org, to order the other two booklets in this series for free:

- **Your Guide to the Breast Cancer Pathology Report**
- **Your Guide to Breast Cancer Treatment**

On our web site, you'll also find:

- **Over 1,000 pages of medical information about all areas of breast cancer.**
- **Over a dozen discussion boards.** Here you can get information and support from others who are going through the same things you are.
- **Monthly Ask-the-Expert Online Conferences.** Join the conferences from the comfort of your own home, and get answers to your questions about a different topic each month.
- **Monthly Research News reports.** Reviews of the most important breast cancer research and how it might affect YOU.
- **The Celebrity Talking Dictionary.** Hear your favorite celebrities say and explain all the hard words related to breast cancer diagnosis and treatment.

breastcancer.org

“To help women and their loved ones make sense of the complex medical and personal information about breast cancer, so they can make the best decisions for their lives.”

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