Canadian Breast Cancer Network

NEVER TOO YOUNG

Practical and Emotional Support for Young Women with Breast Cancer

CBCN.CA

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Canadian Breast Cancer Network (CBCN) is Canada's leading voice for breast cancer and is committed to supporting people with breast cancer through information, education, and advocacy. CBCN exists to ensure the best quality of life for people in Canada diagnosed with breast cancer.

CBCN is governed by a pan-Canadian volunteer Board of Directors who have all had personal experiences with or associated with breast cancer. The insights, knowledge, and lived experience of our directors guide the work of CBCN and the development of patient resources. Thank you to the dedicated group of volunteers.

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A note on men and breast cancer: Although rare, men can also get breast cancer. Less than 1% of all breast cancers occur in men.[1] This handbook aims to specifically address the emotional issues faced by young women diagnosed with breast cancer. Additional information on male breast cancer can be found on: **https://cbcn.ca/en/blog/our-stories/male-breast-cancer**.

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INTRODUCTION

Contrary to most people's belief, young women do get breast cancer. Every year, more than 29,000 Canadian women are diagnosed with breast cancer and about 5,020 (17%) of them are under the age of 49. Although this age group is smaller than older women, breast cancer is still the most commonly diagnosed cancer in women aged 20-49.[2]

A cancer diagnosis at a young age brings unique needs and challenges. Common questions associated with a diagnosis of breast cancer amongst younger women involve fertility preservation, genetic risks, and social/emotional aspects.

Never Too Young: Practical and Emotional Support for Young Women with Breast Cancer was developed with this issue in mind. Its objective is to address the emotional and practical impacts of a breast cancer diagnosis on young women's lives. It provides an overview of common issues and problems and seeks to empower young women by providing them with the information required to make informed decisions about their emotional wellbeing during diagnosis, treatment, and recovery.

Anger. Blindsided. Shocked. Overwhelming. These are some of the words used by younger women to describe their initial emotions when newly diagnosed with breast cancer. After being diagnosed with breast cancer, you or your loved ones may have questions and/or concerns.

> "I thought I was too young to have breast cancer."

Remember you are not alone. In 2022, the Government of Canada estimated that 17% of women with breast cancer were under the age of 50.[3] This group makes up a significant portion of the population, yet they are sometimes overlooked within the healthcare system.

In this handbook, we will talk about 9 main topics, each of which could have a major impact on your life. They are listed somewhat in order, although every woman's experience is unique and yours may follow a different path. You may choose to read the sections in order or to read only the ones you feel apply to you at this time.

Though this handbook was developed and written for young women with breast cancer, it may also be a helpful resource for family, friends, and caregivers, who may feel overwhelmed and unable to deal with these issues. We encourage all members of a young woman's support team to make use of this handbook to improve their understanding of her experience.

> "I was bombarded with pamphlets and booklets, and I read everything possible [that] I could get my hands on, but I found that none of it really suited me or my specific situation... I found that nothing fit me."

*For more information on the specific types and treatments of breast cancer, refer to our newly diagnosed guide ***Breast Cancer and You: A guide for people living with breast cancer (www.cbcn.ca/breast-cancer-and-you)***.

EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

Identifying emotions and the importance of emotional wellbeing

Being newly diagnosed with breast cancer can be overwhelming and can cause many different thoughts and emotions. The first thing to know is that you are not alone. There are many different resources and supports to help you through this diagnosis. It's especially important to not lose sight of how your diagnosis is affecting you emotionally.

Research suggests a breast cancer diagnosis can affect a women's quality of life, especially younger women.[4] A 2005 report entitled Depression Experienced by Young Women Newly Diagnosed with Breast Cancer states that "due to their roles as mothers, wives, and job-holders and the demands imposed by both their families and their careers, young women are more likely to experience unhappiness and greater need for social support when diagnosed with breast cancer."[5] Although treatment is the main focus when fighting cancer, awareness of how you are feeling, and dealing with these feelings, is an important part of the recovery process.

> "I felt like a fly on the wall, outside my body but watching myself hear the news."

Emotional wellbeing is crucial to quality of life, and thus very important to your overall wellbeing. A breast cancer diagnosis can be emotionally draining and can be a life-changing moment. When faced with a disease like breast cancer, it is important for you to feel mentally healthy and able to address it.

Sadness is a normal response to upsetting events, and though the feeling can be very strong at times, it usually does not last for extended periods. **Depression**, however, is more severe. It can be a

constant in your life, and cause you to lose interest in the people, places, and things you once enjoyed.[6] It is important to be able to tell the difference between normal, understandable bouts of sadness, and more debilitating, overwhelming depression. Depression is a severe disease, and it's important to identify and treat it in a timely manner. If you feel that you are experiencing depression, or that your sadness is becoming a problem, seek counselling.

Here are some tips for finding counselling services in your community:

- The **Canadian Mental Health Association** can point you in the direction of local resources around the country, and as an important tool for understanding the signs and symptoms of mental illness, they can be reached at **www.cmha.ca**.
- You can also ask your family doctor, oncologist, or nurse for a referral to a counselling service in your cancer centre or hospital.
- You may consider seeing a private counsellor. Check first with your insurance provider to see if you have coverage under your policy. Trusted friends, your doctor or your insurance company may be able to recommend someone for you to see.
- Your faith or spiritual community may also be able to provide meaningful counselling or other support services.

Additionally, it may be helpful to confide how you are feeling with a trusted family member, friend, or support group to help you during this time. Some women are more comfortable sharing in a one-on-one setting rather than group situations.

> "It was unbelievable, I was 37 and seemingly healthy."

A breast cancer diagnosis can turn your world upside down. You will likely experience a range of emotions, from confusion and disbelief to anxiety. You may feel fear: fear of the disease, fear of the treatment, fear of losing your breast(s) or hair, or fear of losing or leaving your loved ones. It can feel especially difficult if you, like so many young

women with breast cancer, have had to advocate for testing or for your symptoms to be taken seriously. You may feel anger or grief. Anger for having your life disrupted so suddenly and for having to face many life-changing decisions. Stages of grief as you process your breast cancer diagnosis. These are natural reactions, and though they may hurt and cause disruption in your daily life, they are normal and valid. There are others experiencing the same emotions as you.

Breast cancer can leave you feeling as though you lack control over your own self. This is an emotionally difficult time, and though the feelings you may experience will not always be good ones, know that they are common. It is also important to remember that there is no shame in seeking help for your sadness, depression, or other mental health issues.

Where can I find support?

Breast cancer support groups offer a caring environment in which to explore your feelings towards your diagnosis and treatment. Many people take comfort in knowing that there are others with the same issues. There are also many online chat rooms, message boards, and Facebook groups where you can find supportive peers, answers to your questions, and discussions of important issues. Many cancer centres also have support groups that are offered to patients; ask your health care team, social worker, or a patient educator at the cancer centre about options that may be available to you.

The **Canadian Breast Cancer Network** has a dedicated space, **Our Voices Blog**, created for women to share knowledge and personal experiences with one another (www.cbcn.ca/share-your-story). You can connect with others who have been diagnosed with breast cancer on CBCN's Facebook group (www.facebook.com/groups/CanadianBreastCancerPatientNetwork). This allows you to hear from with other women who may be experiencing some of the same things as you.

You can find additional information specifically for young women:

- **Rethink Breast Cancer** (**www.rethinkbreastcancer.com**)
- **Young Adult Cancer Canada** (**www.youngadultcancer.ca**)
- **Young Survival Coalition** (**www.youngsurvival.org/connect**)

Additionally, there are also different coping strategies you can engage in on your own. Many women find that writing helps them keep track of treatment and focus on their emotional journey. Try to jot down each day's events and describe your mood or any issues that have arisen.

You can also maintain a blog or website to keep family updated on your treatment. There are even websites dedicated to offering free hosting for people dealing with critical illness, such as **Caring Bridge** (www.caringbridge.org).

Be creative with how you choose to cope. Maybe you find solace in painting, exercise, meditation, prayer, or taking long, relaxing baths. Mental health is vital to your wellbeing and quality of life and should not be ignored.

METASTATIC (STAGE IV) BREAST CANCER

Some women may be initially diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer (mBC) while for others, it may be a recurrence. Either way, mBC can evoke feelings of anxiousness, depression, anger, and fear.

Metastatic breast cancer, also known as stage IV breast cancer, is the spread of cancerous cell growth through the bloodstream to other areas of the body other than where it was initially formed. It is most commonly spread to the liver, bones, brain, or lungs.[7] It is estimated that about 10% of women diagnosed with breast cancer have an initial diagnosis of mBC.[7]

About 30% of women who are diagnosed with early-stage breast cancer will go on to develop metastatic breast cancer.[8] If the cancer is recurring, you may feel defeated and may have questions. Why? Why you? Was there something you could have done to prevent it from relapsing? Was your previous treatment ineffective? Everyone processes the diagnosis differently and you need to come to terms with the diagnosis at your own pace. Some women find it helpful to dedicate all their energy towards learning more about mBC, treatment options, and connecting with others living with mBC .[9]

> "It was overwhelming at first when I realized there was no longer an 'exit' from being a cancer patient anymore."

There is no cure for mBC. Unlike local or regional recurrences, where the cancer may be operable, in most cases, mBC cannot be completely removed once it has spread to other organs.[9] However, this does not mean it cannot be treated. There are several treatment options that can help slow the growth of the cancer cells and prevent

the disease from continuing to spread. This, in turn, can allow you to live many years – even decades – with the disease. Research is constantly evolving with new treatments becoming available each year.

Treatment for mBC is slightly different than treatment for your initial occurrence. As mBC cannot be cured, the treatment aims to manage the cancer and minimize its side effects. The goal of treatment is to help you live as well as you can for as long as you can. Your quality of life is important, and the treatment regimen you and your healthcare team agree upon should treat that as a priority.

During the course of your treatment, you may be presented with the option to discuss palliative care. While palliative care is often considered part of end-of-life care, it can also be an effective tool that is integrated early into your treatment plan. Palliative care can help you maintain the best quality of life during your treatment by relieving treatment symptoms. It can also provide emotional and spiritual support for you and your family.

A diagnosis of mBC changes your life. Each person deals with a metastatic diagnosis differently. Some women like to change their life perspective and thoroughly enjoy and live each day to its fullest.[10] Some women like to distract themselves with a new hobby or goal to focus on something other than cancer.[10] In addition to the physical effects of mBC, it can also have an emotional toll on you. You may grieve the loss of a way of life you had grown accustomed to, one without the burden of breast cancer and treatment. This grief is important. Do not try to ignore your feelings. Rather, be honest with yourself. Be honest with your family and friends about the ways in which you are reacting. It is important to remember, and be

encouraged by, the many women who live long, productive lives with metastatic breast cancer.

It is also important to prioritize your emotional well-being. You are entitled to your feelings. Everyone deals with stress differently so it's important to find a stress reliever that works best for you. It can be going for a walk, talking with a friend, writing in your journal, or joining a support group.[10] Additionally, your doctors and nurses can refer you to a mental health professional to help you work through your emotions surrounding the illness.

You may find that you are more comfortable with treatment when you are educated about the different options available. Here are some valuable resources to help you learn more about mBC:

- **Canadian Breast Cancer Network**
  - **Metastatic Breast Cancer Handbook** (www.cbcn.ca/mbc-newly-diagnosed-guide) is a guide that offers a deeper look at how metastatic breast cancer affects your daily life and ways to help manage the changes that it brings.
  - **Living with Metastatic Breast Cancer section** (www.cbcn.ca/what_is_mbc) is a section of CBCN's website dedicated to living with mBC that provides information and resources including a navigation tool to help you find out what treatments are available in your province.
- Many other websites have information about metastatic breast cancer along with common treatments and current clinical trials, including **Living Beyond Breast Cancer** (www.lbbc.org) and **BreastCancer.org** (www.breastcancer.org).

A mBC diagnosis will be unchartered territory for you, and it is best to approach it with an open mind to help discover what is useful for your situation.

TELLING FAMILY AND FRIENDS

> "Through much laughter and many, many tears, we fought cancer together, as a family."

Partners

A new cancer diagnosis can be devastating and life-changing not only for yourself but for your loved ones. Breast cancer can be called a "relational cancer" because of the strain and distress it can place on relationships, especially between partners.[11] Studies have found partners of people diagnosed with breast cancer have poorer physical, social, and psychological quality of life.[12] You both may feel high levels of stress, devastation, and helplessness. It is important to remember that people express their emotions and feelings differently and to be mindful of this. Common issues partners face can be classified into three main groups discussed below.

Communication

The stress of a breast cancer diagnosis and treatment can be hard on your relationship, particularly if there are already communication issues. It is vital in any relationship to communicate, but it becomes especially important when a severe illness such as breast cancer is involved. In fact, a 2008 study found that couple-based intervention, where couples were taught how to effectively communicate and share feelings and thoughts during breast cancer treatment, helped improve "individual, medical and relationship functioning for couples."[11]

Breast cancer is unchartered territory for you both, so it's vital to have **open conversations** with each other on your feelings and how you are both coping with it all.[13] It may also be useful for you both to be clear

when expressing your needs. Be honest with your partner so they know how to support you. Be certain first to understand how your partner communicated to help make sure you aren't misunderstanding or misreading any actions or words. It is important to understand your partner's thought process and coping methods, and if they are different from your own, then talk about it. Different coping strategies can lead to resentment and anger, which can cause problems of its own.

New Responsibilities

Your breast cancer diagnosis may also disrupt you and your partner's household roles and responsibilities.[13] Appointments, recovery time, hospital stays, work, and fatigue can all contribute to new household divisions of labour. If you were primarily responsible for taking care of any children or dependents, it may be helpful to discuss an alternative shift in responsibilities.

In addition, you may require their physical support, including transportation to and from appointments, caring for you post-treatment, and help with dressing. When possible, involving your partner in medical appointments will allow them to gain clarity on the disease and treatment options and better understand how to support you. These new responsibilities can be a difficult adjustment for your partner. Therefore, it's valuable to discuss with your partner how these new responsibilities will impact their current schedule to avoid any potential strains on your relationship.

> Being so sick and looking after a new baby was difficult, but I was coping. Unfortunately, my husband wasn't coping and detached himself from the situation as much as possible... It is difficult to predict how people will react when faced with adversity and I would never have guessed my husband would react the way he did..."

Support

Your breast cancer diagnosis impacts both you and your partner. Encourage them to be open and honest if they are feeling overwhelmed, and ask family and friends to help. It's important for you both to remember that there is no shame in not being able to handle everything alone. Additionally, there are many support groups, online communities, and individual counsellors who can offer support and guidance in difficult times.

Many cancers or breast cancer-specific websites have a section dedicated for partners, but there are also resources created specifically for partners. The **Young Survival Coalition** offers support for partners through their **Co-Survivor Community** (www.youngsurvival.org/learn/co-survivors/our-co-survivor-community). The **Canadian Cancer Society's Cancer Connection** community also offers a discussion board dedicated to those caring for someone with cancer (CancerConnection.ca).

Communication is key to keeping your relationship healthy through the stress of breast cancer. Some of your partner's actions may not be helpful or may even be hurtful. Is this purposeful? Is your partner not providing the type of support that you need? Every breast cancer patient is different, just as each relationship is different. Be vocal about your wishes, desires, and needs. Hopefully your partner will be receptive and equally direct in return.

In some cases, your partner may pull away or not be as supportive as you wish. If communication between you and your partner has broken down, it may be beneficial to get professional counselling. The possibility of separation or divorce while facing breast cancer can be devastating, and a therapist can help you work through issues and problems in a safe and well-thought-out way. Your cancer centre or family doctor may be able to connect you with a counsellor.

Children

> "As a mom, standing at the centre of the system, a pillar in our family, I had to wear my grief on my sleeve as I mopped up the tears of my kids..."

Young women are more likely to have younger children when diagnosed with breast cancer. Discussing your cancer diagnosis with your children or other young family members such as nieces or nephews can be an incredibly daunting task. Remember that you know your children best and be confident in your ability to determine how much to share. Many cancer or breast cancer-specific websites have pages dedicated to how to discuss cancer with children. Their advice generally falls into four main categories.[14]

Be Honest

It is important to have honest conversations with young children to help build trust which can later be helpful when facing other challenges in life. Although you may want to spare them from the details, young children are often able to pick up on signs of distress, changes in routines, etc. In the absence of a reason, they may imagine something much worse. Be sure to be open, honest, and age-appropriate.

Simple Language

It is important to prepare your children for what effects the treatment will have on you. If they are aware and prepared, they will have an easier time dealing with them.

If they are young, a simple explanation may do, such as, "Mommy is sick and I am going to try and get better, so I'm going to be going to the hospital more often and getting medicine." Children are very

intelligent and can grasp simple ideologies and concepts. Using a doll or stuffed animal can be useful when explaining to younger children.

With older children, you may feel comfortable describing your type of cancer, where it is located etc. Don't be afraid to use the word "cancer". Avoiding it may create a taboo around the word, leaving your children feeling like your diagnosis may be worse than you explained. Try to answer them as best as you can while encouraging their questions.

Reassure

While it's not guaranteed that everything will be fine, reassurance that you and your doctors are working hard to improve your health can help manage your child's emotions. Younger children may have false interpretations about your illness that need to be tackled. Assure them that they did not in any way make you sick, and that they can't "catch" cancer from you. Since colds and flus may be the only illnesses they have been exposed to, this may worry them. Younger children are often used to consistent routines and your new diagnosis may alter their schedules. It may be worthwhile to explain to them that there may be certain activities you may not be able to partake in.

Whether your children are young or old, assure them that their emotions are normal and that it is okay to feel sad, confused, angry, unsure, or anxious.

Encourage

Remind your children that even though you may look different or feel sick or tired, you are still the same mom. Tell them that even though you might sometimes be too tired, sick, or sore to play, you still love them. Encourage them to ask questions and talk to you about their feelings and concerns. Communication between you and your children is incredibly important to the emotional wellbeing of everyone involved.

There are also several age-appropriate books that may help you talk to your children about your diagnosis and treatment. You may be able to find these at your local public library, your cancer centre library,

or for purchase through a bookstore. Some useful titles include:

- *Mommy has a Boo-Boo: Explaining Breast Cancer to Children*, by Marci Cox. This book is for kids aged 3-9 to help educate what their Mommy is going through. It discusses diagnosis, treatment options, and post-recovery, giving hope to children.
- *Mommy Gets Cancer*, by Dr. Roochi Arora. This book helps answer many questions children may face when a parent is diagnosed with cancer.
- *How Do You Care for a Very Sick Bear*, by Vanessa Bayer. This storybook helps offer advice for children and adults caring for a sick friend.
- *Cancer Hates Kisses*, by Jessica Sliwerski. This book aims to be an encouraging tool for parents and children for having conversations about breast cancer.
- *Butterfly Kisses and Wishes on Wings*, by Ellen McViker and Nanci Hersh. Butterfly Kisses was originally written by McViker for her cousin Hersh, to help her explain her breast cancer diagnosis to her two young children. The book aims to educate and support children as they face a diagnosis of a parent, family member, or loved one.
- *The Year My Mother Was Bald,* by Ann Speltz, takes the form of a journal written by Clare, a pre-teen whose mother has been diagnosed with cancer. It can help children understand cancer, its treatment, and its side-effects.
- *When Someone You Love Has Cancer*, by Alaric Lewis, addresses common worries and fears that young children may have in the face of the cancer diagnosis of a family member or a loved one.
- *Michael's Mommy Has Breast Cancer*, by Lisa Torrey, is a sensitive, loving story which encourages parent-child discussion about breast cancer and its treatment.

There are also some books written for adults which can help you educate and inform your children throughout the cancer journey. Some examples are:

- *When a Parent Has Cancer: A Guide to Caring for Your Children*, by Wendy S. Harpham. This understanding and educational resource deals with parenting issues surrounding illness and gives practical advice for dealing with specific problems that may arise.

- *Cancer in Our Family: Helping Children Cope with a Parent's Illness*, by Sue Heiney, Joan Hermann, Katherine Bruss, and Joy Fincannon. This book outlines ways to help children understand and cope with the effects of a breast cancer diagnosis.
- *Talking to Your Kids about Breast Cancer*, by Morgan Livingstone and Rethink Breast Cancer. This book helps you navigate speaking to your children about your diagnosis.

It is important to remember that each child will react differently to a parent's new diagnosis. Your child may become quieter and worry about your health. Or they may act out, looking for attention in this new and different situation. It is crucial to encourage open communication with your children, not only about your diagnosis but about yours and their feelings. Reassure them that the emotions they are feeling are valid and normal. You may not be able to change the way they react, but through open discussion, you will get a better understanding of why they may be behaving a certain way. It is also important to notify your child's school so they can watch for any serious changes in academic performance or behavior.

Parents and Siblings

A breast cancer diagnosis can affect your whole family, and for young women, this is much more likely to include living parents. Parents may find it very difficult to understand and accept a daughter's diagnosis. Often, breast cancer can be characterized as an "older woman's disease", and it can be shocking to even think of it as a possibility for you. Your mother may find it especially hard and question "Why can't it be me?" and feel guilty about having lived a full life while you are

suffering at such a young age. It is important to be mindful of one another's feelings and have open discussions. Let your mother air her worries and fears. You may both feel better after discussing the way you feel.

Your siblings may also struggle with your diagnosis. Depending on their age, they may feel the same kind of guilt and worry that your parents do and wonder why you were diagnosed and not them. If your siblings or any other close family members are much younger, other issues may arise. Young children may not fully understand the implications of your illness and may feel jealous of the attention that you are getting from the family.

> "A diagnosis of cancer in your child is devastating. You become caught up in a world of cancer treatment that is both foreign and frightening. You put your faith in the healthcare system and trust the medical professionals that hold your child's life in the balance."

As with any family member, parents and siblings are likely to feel scared, confused, worried, and anxious. Unlike a partner or children, however, they may not be living with you so they may feel a little out of the loop. Remember to communicate with them and share as much about your diagnosis and treatment as you and they feel comfortable with. Assure them that you still care for them and want to keep them informed, but that your health and wellbeing have to come first.

If you want your parents to be included in your medical treatment decisions and for staff at your hospital or cancer care centre to keep them informed, it is important to put this in writing. Make it very clear with your healthcare team that you want to have your parents and/or siblings involved and informed about your diagnosis, treatment, and care.

Parents and siblings often want to help, but don't know where to start. Don't be afraid to answer honestly. If they want to help, suggest a way they can. Remember it is okay to ask for help and rely on family as needed. Your parents and siblings will most likely relish feeling helpful during such a hard time in your life.

Caregivers

Women take on many different roles—they're daughters, partners, mothers, sisters, and friends. They have many different responsibilities, and unfortunately a cancer diagnosis doesn't make these duties vanish. One of the roles a woman may be responsible for is to care for aging parents or family members. Being a caregiver while dealing with a breast cancer diagnosis can be overwhelming and stressful. It can be difficult balancing these roles. But it is important to acknowledge your own physical and emotional needs during this time. Prioritizing your health and well-being is important for you to be a successful caregiver. There is no shame in asking for help when needed. For some women, accessing help from others may not be an option. Fortunately, there are many resources offered to help provide support for women during this stressful time.

Financial Assistance:
The federal, provincial, and territorial governments offer caregivers tax credits, subsidies for assistive devices, and assistance with the cost of making the home more accessible, among other services.

Home Care:
Each province and territory has a publicly funded home care program. Services can include nursing, physiotherapy, and help with the activities of daily living (such as bathing, dressing, nutrition, toileting, and mobilization), as well as palliative care and more.

Private home care is also available for those able to afford the additional costs.

There are financial aids, home care services, and food services provided by the province to help support you. Additionally, there are programs that offer self-care for caregivers, allowing for short-term release from your caregiving duties. The cancer centre or a social worker may also provide support for you or may help you find a

caregiver support group in your community. These programs can be made use to help support women through their breast cancer journey and help relieve some of their burden.

Additional information on caregiving while having breast cancer can be found here:
www.cbcn.ca/en/blog/our-stories/caregiving-while-a-patient

Friends and Coworkers

Dealing with friends and coworkers involves issues of disclosure on your part. With immediate family or close friends, the assumption is that you will discuss your diagnosis; but what should you do about other friends, acquaintances, and coworkers? The decision to share a diagnosis differs for each woman. If you are more reserved or private, you may wish to share your breast cancer diagnosis with just a few close friends. Or you may wish to tell more people, including coworkers and friends, so they are prepared for any changes you may experience. Who to tell can be a difficult issue to deal with, and you may feel conflicted, angry, and guilty. Each woman's choice will be different, depending on her circumstances. Remember that this decision is yours alone, and no one should try and influence it. It is up to you to decide who to tell about your diagnosis.

Like family members, the friends and coworkers you choose to tell may feel a range of emotions after hearing about your diagnosis.

You won't be able to anticipate how your friends and family will react and you may even be surprised by their reactions. They might feel a little lost, helpless, awkward, and unsure of what to do or say. They may say the wrong thing, or even say nothing at all. This is common. Some relationships might change - some friendships could diminish while new ones might appear. These outcomes are often impossible to predict.

The best thing to do is to be honest with them. Don't overwhelm them but do let them know how you are feeling, what your plans are, and what they can do to help. Like with family members, don't be afraid to take them up on their offers to help. Some will relish being able to help in any way, whether cooking, cleaning, shopping, or driving.

Tell them about some websites or books if you feel it would help. You may also feel that they would benefit from learning more about breast cancer itself. If so, they can visit our website at www.cbcn.ca to help them understand more about the disease.

SINGLE WOMEN

Single women diagnosed with breast cancer may face different concerns when dealing with treatment than married women or women who are in a relationship.[15] Single women may be facing slightly different financial or emotional concerns.

Dealing with issues surrounding sexuality during diagnosis and treatment may be particularly hard for single women. It is difficult enough to regain your sexuality with a significant other; what happens when there is no permanent partner?

You are not alone

A breast cancer diagnosis may be daunting and can make you feel more isolated than you really are. However, it is important to remember that you are not alone. During this time, it is helpful to surround yourself with family, friends, and well-wishers to help support and care for you. Surrounding yourself with loved ones can also help you have a positive outlook and help you through the hard times. Additionally, there may be others who are feeling the same emotions as you. You can always connect with others via support groups or online communities.

When to start dating?

This decision solely depends on you. Some women prefer to date while undergoing treatment as a means of distraction. Others prefer to start dating post-treatment where they feel less stressed with medical appointments and treatment. It is important to remember there is no right time to start dating. Whenever you feel ready and comfortable, start slowly.

When to share your cancer diagnosis?

Emotions can run high in new relationships to begin with, and breast cancer can complicate things. Fear, anxiety, and confusion are common feelings in new relationships, particularly with the added stress of deciding whether to discuss your present or past experiences with breast cancer.

There is, unfortunately, no universal remedy in these situations. Some would argue that being honest about your breast cancer status upfront is best, to avoid the possibility of being hurt later in the relationship. Others would argue that this information is best revealed only to those you have gotten to know and trust, so they aren't intimated by it. In any case, when or if to tell someone about your history with breast cancer is a personal choice, and each situation is different. What is important is to do what feels right for you. Don't be pressured into discussing your diagnosis when you don't feel comfortable, and don't hold back if you feel that the time is right to disclose this information.

The possibility of your romantic partner losing interest

There is a small chance that your cancer diagnosis or history may be a lot for your partner to handle. They may choose not to date a person living with cancer. It's important to remember that people may make this choice for many reasons other than cancer—such as personal beliefs, looks, etc. Finding a partner comes with its challenges, regardless of a cancer diagnosis.

Some women may perceive dating to be a little intimidating or scary, while others may find dating to be more fun and exciting. Ultimately, it all comes down to being confident with yourself. Entering the dating world after a breast cancer diagnosis can be very different. It's entirely up to you on how you choose to cope with it. It's key to remember there is more to you than a breast cancer diagnosis. Do not let it overtake your life. You are in control of who you want to share the news with, what you feel is appropriate, and when you feel it's right.

FERTILITY

> "It was a lot to take in for my husband and I who were thinking of starting a family in the near future and would now have to put that off... We had to advocate for ourselves..."

A breast cancer diagnosis as a young woman has many implications. Most do not have children or haven't even explored their fertility, so commonly have many questions and concerns about fertility upon their diagnosis. **Fertile Future** (www.fertilefuture.ca) is an organization dedicated to assisting patients with fertility preservation services after their diagnosis of cancer. Although this organization is not specifically focused on breast cancer, it can still provide you with useful information and support. Fertility effects combined with breast cancer itself can be emotionally overwhelming. Facing these challenges requires an understanding of the impact of the disease on fertility and what options are available to help achieve a healthy family in the future.

Some breast cancer treatments that include chemotherapy can have both immediate and long-term effects on fertility. There are many factors to consider when looking at your fertility options after a breast cancer diagnosis, including what type of cancer you have and the types of medications you will be taking.

Radiation therapy and surgery for breast cancer should have no effect on fertility, as the reproductive organs are not affected. Chemotherapy has an immediate effect on the ovary, accelerating the normal loss of eggs that women experience over their reproductive life. According to a Breast Cancer Now booklet called Fertility, Pregnancy and Breast Cancer, "the chemotherapy drugs most likely to affect your ovaries are a group of drugs called 'alkylating agents'. One of these (cyclophosphamide) is commonly used in combination with chemotherapy drugs to treat breast cancer."[16] Loss of too many eggs can lead to infertility, or even complete loss of eggs (ovarian failure or

early menopause). In many cases, chemotherapy is critical for the treatment of breast cancer, but it's important to learn about your treatment and prepare for possible side effects.

Don't hesitate to talk to your healthcare team about side effects that your medications may have on your fertility. The first priority is the eradication of your cancer, but fertility preservation techniques can sometimes be incorporated into your treatment plan.

Even after your chemotherapy treatment is completed, you may undergo additional treatment called adjuvant hormone therapies, which can also impact your fertility. Women with estrogen receptor positive (ER+) breast cancer are often prescribed tamoxifen, a drug that interferes with the activity of estrogen. Tamoxifen is most often prescribed for a five or ten-year period post-treatment. Although it affects each woman differently, it commonly causes menopause-like symptoms, such as fatigue, irregular or absent periods, and vaginal dryness.[17] Research suggests women taking the drug should avoid getting pregnant, as it may be harmful to the fetus.[17] Some women choose to pause the use of tamoxifen and attempt an "interval pregnancy". Even without the use of these medications, patients are normally asked to delay pregnancy for 2 years to allow for the monitoring of their cancer and risk of recurrence. It is important to explain your fertility goals to your doctor so a treatment plan can be developed that you both agree on. Your cancer team will be pleased to address your concerns and help you work out a treatment plan in collaboration with local fertility specialists that takes your fertility into consideration.

Now that you know some of the risks to fertility, it is important to know how to deal with them. Several actions can be taken to

safeguard fertility in the future, including freezing of eggs and embryos, and hormonal suppression of the ovaries.

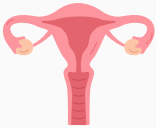
Egg and Embryo Freezing (Cryopreservation)

The only way to truly protect a woman's eggs is to remove them prior to chemotherapy through the process of cryopreservation. Freezing can be done to unfertilized eggs or fertilized eggs (called embryos).[18] Egg freezing provides women with the freedom to decide on the future source of sperm (reproductive autonomy). Embryos (fertilized eggs) appear to have a higher likelihood of creating pregnancy in the future, so embryo freezing is commonly recommended if you have a stable relationship with a male partner.

The process for the freezing of both embryos and eggs involves the use of in vitro fertilization (IVF), which involves stimulating the ovaries with the hormone that naturally makes eggs (follicle stimulating hormone) to produce mature eggs, which are then surgically harvested. Eggs are frozen on the day they are collected. For embryos, eggs are fertilized, grown in culture media (a special mixture of nutrients that is used to promote safe growth of an organism) for 5 days, then cryopreserved as a "blastocyst". Typically, the entire process takes approximately 2 weeks.

Not all regions of Canada provide public funding for this process, so it is important to review costs with your fertility team. Financial support is commonly provided through discounts from the fertility medications or through the **Fertile Future Power of Hope Program**.

Hormonal Suppression of the Reproductive Organs



Another option for fertility preservation during treatment is the hormonal suppression of the ovaries while receiving chemotherapy. This process involves using medications called GnRH agonists (e.g. Depot Lupron and Depot Zoladex) to supress the ovulation centres in the brain, temporarily making the ovaries less active and thus less susceptible to the effects of chemotherapy.[18]

Genetic considerations

Another important factor to consider is whether you carry a genetic predisposition to breast cancer, with the most common being BRCA1 or BRCA2 genetic variants (also known as mutations). Women who have inherited mutations in the BRCA1 or BRCA2 genes from their family have an increased chance of developing not only breast cancer, but also ovarian cancer. Some women choose to proactively remove their ovaries (oophorectomy) before there is a chance for cancer to develop. For patients that wish to remove this disease from their family, genetic testing can be performed on embryos to determine which ones carry the disease through a process called Preimplantation Genetic Testing (PGT).[19]

Third party reproduction

Egg donation is another option for the many women since treatments for breast cancer do not affect the health of the uterus. Ultimately, some patients choose to adopt a child. Services such as the Child and Youth Permanency Council of Canada (www.permanency.ca) provides introductory information and links to services in your area.

For a number of reasons, women may have difficulty conceiving after breast cancer. Fertility is a deeply personal issue and, for many women, can be linked to feelings of self-worth. Anger, sadness, guilt, and grief over a loss of fertility are all normal emotions that young women with breast cancer can experience. Some have even shared that the stress related to infertility is comparable to the cancer diagnosis itself. The inability to have children in the future can be devastating, but there are other options to reduce this risk.

Pregnancy During Diagnosis and Treatment

For some women, concern about future fertility is overshadowed by concern about their current pregnancies. Women who are pregnant at the time of their diagnosis are faced with a situation that is rare and under-studied, even though pregnancy-

related cancers are on the rise. Where the options were once to either terminate the pregnancy or wait until birth before beginning treatment, thereby increasing the risk posed by the cancer, new treatment options are now being explored.

Increasing numbers of women who are pregnant when diagnosed are undergoing chemotherapy.[20] Talk with your doctor and get a second opinion. Understand your desires, your options, and your limits.

Breastfeeding

Women who have just recently given birth also face unique circumstances when it comes to breast cancer diagnosis and treatment. If you are breastfeeding, many suspicious lumps or breast changes are brushed off as mastitis or other breastfeeding-related ailments. In addition, mammograms can be more difficult to read or inconclusive. If this is the case, a needle biopsy or even an excisional (surgical) biopsy may be appropriate.

Lactation can make these procedures more complicated, and some medical professionals may refuse to do them before you wean your child. This process can take weeks, even months. Waiting to diagnose a suspicious lump can be nerve-wracking.

If you do not wish to wean before these treatments, seek out a doctor or surgeon who is willing to work with you while you are lactating. In some cases, for example if an invasive surgical biopsy or lumpectomy is needed, you may not be able to continue to breastfeed.

Once treatment begins, it may be prudent to wean your child. The drugs included in your chemotherapy cocktail as well as other medications you may be taking are dangerous and not suitable to be ingested by a breastfeeding infant.

PRACTICAL RESOURCES

Financial

Breast cancer, like any serious illness, can put a strain on your financial situation. There may be additional financial costs due to medication expenses, time off work to attend medical appointments, or travel to these appointments. Overall, this can be quite expensive and can be an added burden increasing levels of stress, anxiety, and anger, combined with the emotional turmoil of the breast cancer itself.

However, there are many financial aids made available to support you through this difficult time. CBCN offers information on financial resources to help you navigate the available financial supports during breast cancer. Visit www.cbcn.ca/planning-tips for more information.

RRSPs, Home Equity and Similar Personal Financial Resources
Most advice for situations of financial strain brought on by an illness like breast cancer centre around using already acquired equity; that is, financial resources that you already have. This may mean using savings, RRSPs, or other investments to help you with your financial needs.

Supplementary Health and Disability Insurance
Whether this is a health plan at work or one you have purchased independently, supplementary insurance can help cover costs such as drugs and time off work. It is important to familiarize yourself with the terms and conditions of your coverage.

Employment Insurance Sickness Benefit
Employment Insurance Sickness Benefits can be paid up to 26 weeks. To qualify, you must be unable to work due to "sickness, injury or quarantine," and have worked 600 hours in the last 52 weeks. You can reach the information service at 1-800-206-7218 between the hours of 8:30 am and 4:30 pm or go to www.canada.ca.

Employment Insurance Compassionate Care Benefits
Compassionate Care Benefits can be paid out to someone who is temporarily away from work to care for a family member who is "critically ill" or receiving end-of-life care. To learn more, or to see if you or a family member may qualify, you can contact the information service at 1-800-206-7218 between the hours of 8:30am and 4:30 pm or go to www.canada.ca. However, this benefit is generally not of use to recently diagnosed breast cancer patients as they are not "critically ill."

Scholarships
If you are a student, you may be eligible for some scholarships or grants that are made available to those living with cancer. This funding can be used towards your future education and can be of use if your diagnosis impacted you financially. You should contact your school for more information regarding this.

Other Resources
Additionally, CBCN has developed a **Financial Navigator Tool** (www.cbcn.ca/financialnavigator) to help provide information on programs available to Canadians that can potentially help offset the financial impact of a breast cancer diagnosis. It is organized by province, demographics, and type of expense.

The **Canadian Cancer Society** provides financial information and support based on your province or territory (www.cancer.ca/living-with-cancer/how-we-can-help/financial-help).

You may also want or need to supplement any government or insurance-related reimbursement with independent fundraising. Gather a group of family or friends and coworkers who want to help, and brainstorm ideas. Can you have a multi-family garage sale? A silent auction or barbeque? Or set up a go-fund-me page? Though these options may seem minor, every little bit of money can help when faced with breast cancer treatment and recovery. In addition, the outpouring of support you will get from events like this can be really encouraging.

These are all valid options, but your circumstance may mean that you cannot make use of them. Young women are less likely to have large amounts of equity or may be in school and working part-time. They may have young dependents, no health insurance provided through their employer or other financial burdens. Whatever the case may be, some of these financial aids listed above may not be applicable or available to you. So, you may wonder, what can you do?

It is important to try every option available even if you may not qualify for all of them. Contact your cancer centre or hospital's social work department where you can speak with a social worker who will help you find resources and discuss your financial options. You can also do research on your own to get an idea of what services are available.

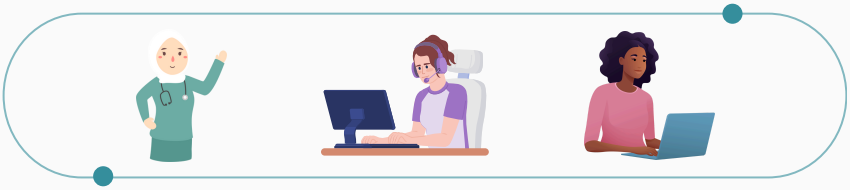
Work

If you are employed when diagnosed with breast cancer, it is important to understand how this will affect this aspect of your life. The decision whether to continue to work or work full or part-time hours is an individual one. Many people feel they need to take time off to focus 100% on themselves to get healthy again. Others do not have the financial stability to leave their jobs or feel that they could benefit from the sense of accomplishment or distraction from cancer that their jobs provide them with. Regardless of your decision, it can be an emotional and troubling time. You may feel exhausted and

stressed if you need to work despite not wanting to. You may feel that you have lost your way if you have left a job you enjoyed. These are all normal reactions.

If you decide to work through your treatment, it may be helpful to disclose your diagnosis to a few people. You don't need to tell everyone, but by sharing with your coworkers, they may be able to help when needed. For instance, if you have to miss work due to medical appointments or need help with any work deadlines, they can help alleviate your stress.

It is also important to tell your employer or supervisor. Though you may be capable of working during treatment, it may take a toll on you. Your productivity may be reduced, and you will have to miss work for appointments and treatment. You may also experience what is often referred to as "cancer related brain fog," or thinking and memory problems commonly experienced by people diagnosed with cancer. This may alter your productivity and working style.



There are also resources to help prepare you for returning to work. Cancer and Work (www.cancerandwork.ca) is a Canadian based website that provides detailed information about returning to work after cancer. There are some legal policies that help protect you and your job through this time period. However, you should familiarize yourself with your company policies to ensure you have all the information that you need.

School

Being a younger woman, there's a chance you may currently be in school. You may be working towards a diploma, undergraduate, graduate, or professional degree. Regardless, attending school during diagnosis and treatment can be extremely strenuous. The workload and any other responsibilities you may have can complicate the process of your breast cancer diagnosis and treatment.

Many university health centers are very busy, and often over-worked and under-funded. Medical check-ups can be hard to come by, and they are often rushed. In these situations, you have to be your own health advocate and ensure you get the right medical services you are entitled to.

After diagnosis, you are more likely to come up with more questions. You may be overwhelmed with information and decisions. It is important to be informed about your situation. This will help with any decisions you will have to make regarding your treatment. Make sure to look into what insurance you have beyond your provincial coverage. Get in touch with your student union or if you are a teaching assistant, your labour union, for information about coverage.

You may feel the need to disclose your breast cancer diagnosis with everyone. However, this may not be the case. It is important to share this information with your professors, so they are aware in case you need to miss classes or have extensions for assignments. It is also important to advise your university registrar's office of your diagnosis, as they may be able to help reschedule exams and other official matters if needed. Some women feel comfortable sharing their

diagnosis with more people such as fellow classmates or friends while others may choose to selectively share their diagnosis. There is no right or wrong, and the decision is entirely yours.

Balancing your workload and time commitment of assignments and classes may be challenging when you are trying to focus on your health. You may need to lighten your course load to help accommodate your treatment appointments. Additionally, many institutions have on-campus associations for people with disabilities that often work with students with chronic or long-term illnesses. These services may be able to help you with alternative arrangements for tests or exams, note-taking services if you are temporarily unable to attend classes, and liaison services between you and the university administration.

You may need to take time off from your program completely to focus on treatment and recovery. It is important to meet with your registrar, program coordinator, and faculty advisor to discuss your specific options. Remember that taking time away from your studies is by no means a failure and does not mean you cannot return to them. Treating your breast cancer and recovering physically and mentally is your priority. Listen to your body and mind and trust your decisions.

You may find it helpful to speak with other students in a similar situation as yours. Some online support groups such as www.breastcancer.org and **Young Survival Coalition** www.youngsurvival.org may have members who are or were recently students during treatment.

SEXUAL HEALTH AND INTIMACY

Many women with breast cancer at some point face sexual health and intimacy issues. After a breast cancer diagnosis, sex can often be overlooked. Treating cancer is the priority but it shouldn't overshadow your quality of life, and intimacy and sexuality are often a crucial part of life.

Intimacy and sexuality issues are most often caused by two equally powerful forces—physical changes related to breast cancer treatment and self-image. Both can be powerful and disruptive in your intimate life, and it is important to be aware of the issues they will raise and ways to deal with them.

> "This disease oftentimes challenges a woman's identity, self-esteem, body image and relationships..."[21]

Physical Side Effects

Every woman is different and so are the side effects experienced. Some common ones include (but are not limited to):

- Loss of libido
- Vaginal dryness
- Vaginal tightness
- Vaginal atrophy (in some cases)

These symptoms can all have profound effects on your sexuality and feelings (both mental and physical) towards intimacy. These side effects are explained in further detail below.

Additionally, certain medications you are taking may cause premature menopause and menopause-like symptoms. These can vary across women; however, most women find that during and after treatment,

their desire for sex and/or intimacy decreases. Advice on how to deal with a lessened sex drive differs and can range from exercising more to using sex toys. You can also seek advice from a professional or other women with breast cancer who may have had similar experiences.

You may have zero desire for sex and in fact the act itself may be painful or uncomfortable, but these problems will not go away if ignored; in fact, the issues will probably be compounded and become harder to deal with. If sex and intimacy are important to your quality of life, it is best to work on addressing these challenges. The main thing to remember is that what works for one woman may not work for you. Don't be afraid to try different things and be honest with your partner about your feelings. Openness is key and miscommunication or silence can aggravate the problems you are already experiencing.

Vaginal dryness is often a result of natural menopause, but is also known to be caused by chemotherapy, as well as certain drugs, such as Arimidex, Aromasin, Femara, Tamoxifen, and Faslodex. Vaginal dryness is a very common occurrence. Less common, though not rare, is vaginal atrophy. Vaginal atrophy is marked by severe thinning and inflammation of the vaginal walls. It can also cause the vaginal canal to shorten or tighten. These symptoms can make sexual intercourse painful or uncomfortable.[22]

Many treatments for vaginal dryness or vaginal atrophy are location-specific estrogen replacements. Though the estrogen is released only in the vagina, and not designed to be absorbed into the blood stream, these products may not be appropriate for some women with breast cancer, particularly if your cancer is ER+. Speak to your doctor

about options that may be best for you. Many women living with breast cancer may find that estrogen-replacement products are not appropriate for their situation and must therefore turn to a vaginal moisturizer. There are several products designed for menopausal symptoms such as:

K-Y Liquibeads
K-Y Liquibeads are vaginally inserted "beads" containing moisturizer, which are designed to relieve symptoms of vaginal dryness for up to four days. Many women enjoy the fact that they last several days, which means that spontaneity can still be an active part of their sex lives.

Replens
Replens is a vaginal moisturizer, to be applied internally, which lasts for several days. It is designed to restore vaginal moisture, rejuvenate the vaginal lining, and help eliminate dead skin cells.

Along with everyday vaginal moisturizer, you will likely still need an additional lubricant when engaging in sexual intercourse. You may need to try several different brands or types (water-based or silicone-based) to find which one works best for you and your partner. Your pharmacist or health care team at the cancer centre may be able to recommend specific brands that work best.

Vaginal atrophy can cause shortening or tightening of the vaginal canal as the vaginal cells themselves shrink and lose elasticity. Where vaginal dryness can often be treated with topical remedies, vaginal tightness can be more difficult. Oftentimes, doctors will recommend vaginal dilators to slowly stretch the vagina to the point where sexual intercourse is comfortable again. A dilator set is designed to be used over the course of several weeks or months. The dilator is used by gently inserting it into the vagina with the help of lubricant and leaving it in for a few minutes. The goal is to be able to move through the different sizes, until the largest dilator is no longer painful. This may take some time, so patience is key.

It is very important to have a conversation with your doctor or healthcare team about what products are safe and effective to use while undergoing treatment. They will be better able to recommend products according to your needs.

Self-Image, Intimacy, and Emotionally Induced Loss of Libido

Not all intimacy issues are physical. Beyond menopausal symptoms, your sexual drive can also be strongly affected by your emotional state. Depression is a known cause for significant loss of sexual drive, but it is not the only one.[23] Women going through treatment may not be clinically depressed, but may be suffering from loss of libido, nonetheless. Hormonal therapies and other drugs can also lower the libido of some women. Breast cancer treatment can leave you tired, anxious, scared, and nauseous and the last thing you may desire is sexual contact.

Being diagnosed with cancer can also alter one's self-image and self-esteem. Dramatic changes in physical appearance and health can have a profound effect on your ability and willingness to engage sexually or intimately with a partner. A breast cancer diagnosis can be disruptive to your sex life and losing one (or both) of your breasts can cause upheaval in your feelings of sexuality and femininity. You may feel like you lost a major part of yourself. You may also wonder if your partner will still find you attractive, or if you will ever feel the same. Difficulties in adjusting are nothing to be ashamed of or worried about, yet these feelings may lead to a dramatic shift in your sexual experiences.

A 2006 report in the journal Psycho-Oncology entitled *Body Image and Sexual Problems in Young Women with Breast Cancer* found that a significant number of women experienced body image issues and sexual problems post-diagnosis. In those women who were sexually active, the most frequent body image issues were related to common psychosocial issues such as "mastectomy and possible reconstruction, hair loss from chemotherapy, concern with weight gain or loss, poorer mental health, lower self-esteem, and partner's difficulty understanding one's feelings."

Younger women with breast cancer were also found to have more body image issues and be less sexually active than healthy women in the same age range.[24] The study stresses the importance of getting proper information from your healthcare professionals as well as practicing open communication between you and your partner. It is important to know that these issues are common among women with breast cancer; you are not alone.[25]

Be open and honest with your partner. Do not try to hide your issues, as it will likely only compound the problems. Your treatment involves caring for yourself physically, but do not forget your emotional and sexual self. It is deeply important to your well-being and quality of life.

In addition to seeking professional guidance, you may find that there are things you can do yourself to regain some of the self-confidence that you are missing. Some women find that being physically active in sports or dance helps them reconnect with their bodies in a safe, healthy, and happy way. A popular activity among women with breast cancer is dragon-boating. Seek out your local dragon-boat team to see if this activity is right for you, or try something new like a dance class, yoga, or swimming to see if you can benefit.

HEALTHY LIVING

A new breast cancer diagnosis can be life-altering. Your life can be incredibly busy, confusing, and hectic. Throughout your treatment, you will be focused primarily on treating your cancer. However, it is likely that you will also be concerned with other aspects of your life, such as family, work, and finances. During diagnosis, treatment, and even post-treatment, it is important to focus on you. Not just on your cancer or your treatment schedule or your side effects, but you.

As previous chapters of this handbook suggest, breast cancer profoundly affects your emotional wellbeing and quality of life. It is important to remain realistic and to recognize and understand your diagnosis and treatment plan as well as its potential side effects.

Focusing energy on building a positive outlook regarding your treatment and recovery may help you feel better mentally and physically. You will probably have many other parts of your life that require your attention and energy, from children to work to marriage. It is important to make time to focus on yourself, because by re-energizing and focusing on feeling better inside, you will have more to offer those around you. Sometimes, self-care is disregarded during this stressful time. But self-care is crucial to your physical, mental, and emotional well-being. It may seem impossible to try to make time for yourself but doing any small activity that makes you smile or brings you happiness will help calm, relax, rejuvenate, or boost your confidence.

It is also important for you to have healthy living habits in order to maintain your physical strength and health. Taking care to monitor nutrition and exercise levels is an important part of a healthy, post-treatment lifestyle; being overweight has been linked to lower survival rates and increased rates of breast cancer diagnosis.[26] For this reason alone, it is important for you to maintain a healthy weight after your treatment. Eating well and exercising regularly can also have other positive side effects, such as raising energy levels.

Nutrition

A healthy lifestyle starts with good nutrition. You may decide to evaluate your eating habits, and make permanent, healthy changes. **Canada's Food Guide** (which can be found at food-guide.canada.ca) outlines what a healthy diet looks like. By following its recommendations and including a variety of food, you can easily meet your nutritional requirements.

During treatment, it's important to make food choices that are right for you and your needs. These choices may or may not follow the exact recommendations outlined in Canada's Food Guide. When undergoing chemotherapy or other systemic therapies, it's important to follow the advice of your oncology team. The pharmacist at your cancer centre may advise you to stay away from certain foods while undergoing systemic treatments. Some foods may cause drug interactions or may not be well tolerated.

There are also many breast cancer-specific websites that offer additional nutrition information, including:

- **Canadian Breast Cancer Network** (www.cbcn.ca)
- **Canadian Cancer Society** (www.cancer.ca)
- **BreastCancer.org** (www.breastcancer.org)

Their advice follows general suggestions about healthy eating habits. The key suggestions are:

- **Eat plenty of fruits and vegetables**
  Experts suggest eating a variety of fruits and vegetables. It is recommended to aim to make half your plate of fruits and vegetables during meals. Fruits and vegetables are highly nutritious and can also lower your risk for cardiovascular disease.

- **Include whole grains**
  A food is described as "whole grain" when the entire grain seed is used, including the fibre, vitamin and mineral-dense germ, and bran parts. Whole grain foods can help you feel full and have numerous other health benefits. These foods have been shown to help reduce the risk of heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and hypertension.[27] Whole grain foods have nutrients such as fibre, vitamins, and minerals.

- **Limit saturated fats and transfats**
  Saturated fats and transfats can increase your risk of developing heart disease.[28] Instead try fats such as olive, canola, and sunflower oils, and foods such as nuts, salmon, and avocado, which are all high in healthy fats. Remember that all fats are high in calories and even foods high in healthier fat should be eaten in moderation.

- **Limit red meat**
  Red meat is an important source of iron, protein, and vitamin B12 but consuming an excess amount can contribute to an increased risk of some cancers.[29] Try to use lean red meat or limit your consumption overall.

- **Manage portion sizes**
  Eating healthy is only one aspect; the other is to manage the portion sizes. Eat a healthy portion, enough so that you are comfortably full, and try not to overeat.

- **Get enough calcium and vitamin D**
  Studies have shown that a decreased level of estrogen in women with premature menopause increases the risk of osteoporosis.[30] To maintain healthy bones and reduce the risk of developing other chronic diseases, ensure that your diet is providing you with enough calcium and vitamin D, and use additional supplements if necessary. You can learn more at the **Osteoporosis Canada** website (www.osteoporosis.ca).

Whether you are looking to lose, gain, or maintain your weight, it is important to be healthy. Everyone's body shape and height are unique, and so are their dietary needs. The above tips are general ideas to help improve eating habits, but you may need more direction. Dieticians of Canada can provide you with more detailed information and help connect you with a registered dietician in your area. They can be reached at www.unlockfood.ca.

You may also benefit from the **BC Cancer Agency's** *A Nutrition Guide for Women with Breast Cancer*. This guide provides nutritional information for newly diagnosed women. It can be found at www.bccancer.bc.ca by searching "A Nutrition Guide for Women with Breast Cancer".

Exercise

Being active is another important part of leading a healthy life. Regular exercise is a key factor in maintaining a healthy weight, and studies have shown that women who do not exercise regularly are at a higher risk of developing breast cancer.[31]

Some benefits of exercising include:[32]

- It can reduce your chance of having a breast cancer recurrence
- It can help keep you healthy and active
- It can help reduce your side effects of your treatment
- You'll have more energy and have a positive attitude and improved quality of life

The '*Canadian 24-hour Movement Guidelines for Adults*' by the **Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology** recommends that adults get 150 minutes of moderate physical activity every week. This activity does not need to be exceedingly strenuous, nor does it have to be done all at once.

Maintaining a certain level of physical activity during active treatment can look much different than the choices you make around exercise once your treatments are finished. Systemic therapy can cause side effects like nausea or fatigue, while surgery can temporarily limit your mobility during recovery. These side effects can make it difficult for some to maintain the recommended guidelines of physical activity per week. While it can be very beneficial to incorporate physical activity during active treatment, in whatever capacity you can manage, it is okay and expected for this to look different than what you may be used when not in active treatment.

Once you are feeling comfortable and able during or after treatment, you can try to integrate physical activity into your daily routine, such as walking to work, taking the stairs, playing at the park with your kids, or even doing extra yard work. On days when you have more time, you could try to organize a more structured activity, such as jogging around your neighbourhood, a family bike ride, swimming at your local pool, or joining your local dragon boating team. Being active can help you look and feel better and can be beneficial to your health, so try to incorporate new and exciting activities into your life.

LIFE AFTER TREATMENT

Younger women with breast cancer face a variety of issues unique to their age, some of which do not end when treatment does. Due to their age, young women will spend a much larger period of their lives living after treatment is complete, and with this comes emotional and physical challenges. When treatment ends, most women hope that everything will go back to normal, and that their lives will return to what they were before breast cancer. However, this may not be the case. Many women struggle with breast cancer, physically and emotionally, long after treatment ends.

When treatment ends, life changes and a "new normal" begins. During treatment, you may have had many people—family, friends, and coworkers—offering their help and support. When treatment is over, they may assume that you no longer want or need their help anymore. But your life may not be back to normal; you may be heading back to work or school, looking for a new job and adjusting to life after breast cancer. With these changes comes a huge emotional shift, which can be harder than you may think. Don't be afraid to tell those close to you that you are still struggling and still need their support. It is healthier to be honest rather than try to contain your feelings of being overwhelmed, distressed, or anxious.

For many women, fear of recurrence can be a huge emotional burden. Women who have had breast cancer have an increased chance of getting a new breast cancer, and this can cause feelings of anxiousness and stress. It is important to be aware of your risks and work towards a healthier lifestyle, but you should not dwell on the

"what-ifs". If you are in the recovery stage, you have the freedom to live without surgeries, chemotherapy, or radiation and countless medical appointments. You have the opportunity to live your life how you want to live it, and you should take full advantage of this. Do not focus on the negative possibilities but rather the positive certainties.

Many women with breast cancer also struggle with "survivor's guilt" when faced with the reality of friends or family lost to the disease. Along with the feelings of happiness or relief that comes from finishing treatment, you may feel burdened with feelings of grief and guilt. "Why me?" may be a question you ask yourself often, wondering how is it that you have survived when others haven't. This is a normal reaction. A breast cancer experience is traumatic and the emotions that come along with it are not going to go away as soon as treatment ends. It is important not to ignore the feelings of guilt you may have, but rather to understand and work through them.

Consider joining a breast cancer support group or dragon boat team to help you adapt to this new normal. Volunteering at your local cancer group (support group, cancer centre, or organization) can also play a key role in your life after treatment. It can provide a sense of purpose and community while also serving as a meaningful way to honour the memory of those who lost their lives to breast cancer.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Canadian Breast Cancer Network www.cbcn.ca
The Canadian Breast Cancer Network is Canada's leading patient-directed breast cancer health charity. CBCN voices the views and concerns of breast cancer patients through education, advocacy activities, and the promotion of information sharing.

Canadian Cancer Society www.cancer.ca
The Canadian Cancer Society is a national organization dedicated to eradicating cancer and enhancing the quality of life of those living with cancer. Their support services can be reached at 1-888-939-3333. Here individuals can speak to a Cancer Information Specialist about medical questions, or get information about community and financial support.

Fertile Future www.fertilefuture.ca
Fertile Future is a Canadian non-profit organization that provides fertility preservation information and support services to cancer patients and oncology professionals.

Quebec Breast Cancer Foundation www.rubanrose.org/en
The Quebec Breast Cancer Foundation is dedicated to making investments for the benefit of the province's breast cancer patients and its scientific medical community.

Rethink Breast Cancer www.rethinkbreastcancer.com
Rethink Breast Cancer is dedicated to making the breast cancer cause more relevant and accessible to young people through education, research, and support programs.

Wellspring www.wellspring.ca
Wellspring is a network of cancer support centres across the country that can help you connect with support groups and programs in your area or online.

Young Adult Cancer Canada (YACC) www.youngadultcancer.ca
Young Adult Cancer Canada supports young adults living with, through, and beyond cancer.

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