

Breast Cancer Awareness

How can you help survivors and affected community members?

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The Importance of Breast Cancer Awareness

Per research conducted by the World Health Organization, 2021 identified breast cancer as the most common cancer globally, accounting for 12% of new worldwide cancer cases annually. This year alone, approximately 287,850 new cases of invasive and 51,400 non-invasive breast cancer will be diagnosed in women while 2,710 cases will be diagnosed in men. “Roughly 85% of breast cancers occur in women with no family history” (www.breastcancer.org) and “about 43,250 women will die from breast cancer” (<https://www.cancer.org/cancer/breast-cancer/about/how-common-is-breast-cancer.html>).

Of the three stages of breast cancer, mortality rates for those surviving five years after a diagnosis differ. “98-100% of individuals survive a Stage I diagnosis, 90-99% survive a Stage II diagnosis, and 66-98% survive a Stage III diagnosis” (<https://www.komen.org/breast-cancer/facts-statistics/breast-cancer-statistics/>). However, it is necessary to note the importance of regular mammograms and other screening exams, and a healthy lifestyle, as early detection makes a difference in whether one is able to overcome breast cancer.

How does breast cancer affect survivors?

Post-treatment follow-up care becomes a major staple in the life of a survivor. Though the schedule of follow-up depends upon type and degree of advancement of cancer when it was detected, and length of treatment, follow-up care can be quite extensive. Immediately following diagnosis and treatment, doctor's appointments to monitor and prevent a recurring diagnosis will occur every few months; they only progress to yearly follow-up exams after an individual is cancer free for five years. Additional testing consists of:

1. Bone Density Tests and Bone Scans
2. CT or PET Scans
3. Pelvic Exams
4. Blood Tests
5. X-rays

In addition to cancer specific follow-up care, receiving mental and emotional support is essential to help survivors combat their lack of self-esteem due to concerns about body image and sexuality. These feelings of low self-esteem can be exacerbated if one is experiencing hair loss or has to undergo a mastectomy and possible reconstructive surgery.

It can be challenging for a cancer survivor to reconnect with loved ones. Relationships can be challenged when they undergo strain because individuals are consumed with their own fears and consequently avoid from spending time with you or treat you as if you were a child. Some of the most common relationship issues for cancer survivors include:

1. Others giving too much attention or being nosy
2. Changing responsibilities and/or roles
3. Confusing expectations
4. Withdrawal

Though difficult, it is possible to navigate nurturing and repairing these relationships. The following tips include:

1. Staying as involved and active as possible
2. Seeking out professional help and support
3. Maintaining relationships that offer value
4. Communicating expectations
5. Initiating conversations
6. Allowing others to help
7. Being patient

How does breast cancer affect a survivor's family members and friends?

It is important to understand family members and friends move along the cancer journey with the individual who received the diagnosis. They help cope with the diagnosis by assisting in researching treatment options, healthcare systems, insurance, and appointments. They experience extreme distress, especially if/when the cancer returns, or they are burdened with being a caretaker.

Family members, friends, and cancer survivors will need to map out a new lifestyle known as the "new normal" (<https://www.cancersupportcommunity.org/family-and-friends>).

How can volunteers support survivors or affected community members?

Volunteers can support survivors or affected community members in many ways, especially stepping in for friends and family members and sharing in the caretaking responsibilities. A volunteer's assistance also provides necessary emotional support, information, and referral services. Additionally, volunteers can provide support by offering their services including:

1. Driving/Accompanying Patients to Doctor's Appointments
2. Creating and Distributing Care Packages
3. Home Improvement Contractor
4. Financial or Legal Planner
5. Cosmetologist
6. Masseuse

RESOURCES

- A. <https://www.breastcancer.org/facts-statistics>
- B. <https://www.cancer.org/research/cancer-facts-statistics/all-cancer-facts-figures/cancer-facts-figures-2022.html>
- C. <https://www.komen.org/breast-cancer/facts-statistics/breast-cancer-statistics/>
- D. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/cancer/in-depth/cancer-survivor/art-20045378>
- E. <https://www.cancersupportcommunity.org/family-and-friends>
- F. <https://www.compassoncology.com/cancer-survivorship/helping-others/making-a-difference>