



BREAST CANCER PATIENT CARE

Breast cancer isn't what it was 20 years ago. Survival rates are climbing, thanks to greater awareness, more early detection, and advances in treatment. For roughly 250,000 Americans who are diagnosed with breast cancer each year, there are plenty of reasons to be hopeful. However, it's a shock to learn that a friend or loved one has breast cancer. It's natural to want to know all the details. But a lot of questions can be tough for her to face. She may not have all the answers yet. Accept what she's sharing. She understands you don't know what to say. But instead of, "You're a fighter; you're going to beat this," try, "I can't imagine how you must feel, I'm here to listen if you want to talk."

You'll probably never get the call. It's better to be specific about what you can do. Say "I can help you with housework on Tuesday or Thursday," or, "I'm making some casseroles, is there something you would prefer or any ingredient I should avoid?" If she's recovering from surgery, offer to wash her hair since reaching above her head is nearly impossible.

Kids are kids whether a parent is dealing with cancer or not. Offer to drive your friend's children to school and shuttle them to soccer practice. Help make things as "normal" as possible. Many teachers and other adults don't know what to say to kids with a sick parent -- so they say nothing. Be someone they can turn to. Tell them that you'll listen when they want to talk.

It's easy for someone with breast cancer to get overwhelmed by the decisions she has to make. She might need your help to understand it all. Offer to go along to important doctor's appointments to take notes and ask questions. Having another set of ears in the room may ease her mind. You can offer to drive her to chemotherapy or radiation sessions, too.

A mastectomy -- the removal of one or both breasts -- is an ordeal. Many women are heartbroken to lose such intimate body parts. Reconstruction can rebuild the shape and look of their chest, but it's not the same as breast enhancement. It can take many surgeries before it's all over. Some women decide against doing it at all. Whatever your loved one chooses, accept it. Don't try to change her mind.

If someone in their 20s or 30s has the disease, she's probably tired of people saying, "You're so young and active, how can you have cancer?" She may feel isolated because many people in her shoes are much older. When she feels comfortable, urge her to find a group of young people with breast cancer who can understand what she's going through.

More than 2,500 men are diagnosed with breast cancer each year in the U.S. If it's a guy you know, don't question why he has a "woman's disease" or insist it must be the wrong diagnosis. Men with

breast cancer may need even more support because they feel out of place. Most importantly, encourage the men in your life to get any breast lump checked by a doctor right away.

There are many different kinds of breast cancer. Some grow fast, some grow slow. Some are harder to treat than others. You probably won't know exactly which type your friend has -- she might not even know right away. So don't say, "My friend had breast cancer and it was horrible," or "My aunt's cancer was no big deal." Each case is unique, and people respond differently to treatment.

People going through treatment or recovering from surgery have a limited amount of energy and need to spend it wisely. Sometimes, they have to turn down an invitation or cancel plans. She's not trying to ditch you -- her body probably needs a reboot. Take a raincheck for a day when she's feeling more rested. If your friend is up for getting lunch or meeting for coffee, the last thing she probably wants to do is talk about cancer. After all, she's more than her disease. Try to keep the conversation focused on everyday things -- her kids, a recent vacation, or a TV show you both like. If she wants to talk about cancer, she'll bring it up.

Many people with breast cancer need to take meds for 5-10 years to try to keep cancer from coming back. These drugs can have bad side effects like bone and joint pain, mood swings, and fatigue. Often doctors prescribe other pills -- like antidepressants and pain meds -- to fight those side effects. Know that your loved one might not be back to her "old self" for a while.

Treatment is over, and there are no signs of cancer. That's great news, but some people still may have some mental healing to do. Your loved one may show signs of post-traumatic stress disorder, like not sleeping well or having crying fits. She may constantly check for lumps and bumps. Instead of telling her to "get back to normal," urge her to talk to her doctor. Medications, therapy, and other treatments can help. Please keep your opinions about cancer prevention to yourself. It's not helpful to suggest that yoga, juicing, or anything else could've prevented your friend's breast cancer.

There's no doubt changing treatments can wear them out. They may have difficulty with daily chores, work, and social outings. This can make them feel isolated. It's crucial to reach out for support. They may be able to go to treatments, help out with chores, or just aren't alone. Many people choose to join a support group, either near them or online.



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People with breast cancer really do want your thoughts and prayers -- even if you haven't been in touch for years. Let your friend know you're thinking of her by dropping a nice note or beautiful card in the mail. Even just a text message once in a while will brighten her day. She might be too wiped out to respond right away, but know that all your good thoughts and best wishes are appreciated.