Lose The Cancer, Not Your Style

Cancer treatment that causes changes in your physical appearance may affect how you feel about yourself. If you feel loss, sadness, or stress about changes in your physical appearance, take heart. There are ways to soften the impact of these changes so you look and feel better.

Hair loss

No woman wants to lose her hair, so if it happens, it can be one of the hardest parts of cancer treatment. If you are expecting to lose your hair, get yourself a wig or a great hat or scarf. Any of these can help you feel better and express your personal style. Ask your medical team or social worker if they know of salons in your area that specialize in medically related hair loss. Most insurance companies will cover the cost of a wig, and some salons provide discounts or financial assistance for people with cancer.

Chemotherapy can also cause you to lose your eyelashes and eyebrows. Some women find that special makeup techniques and false eyelashes make them feel more like themselves. Look Good Feel Better (LGFB) is a public service program that teaches beauty techniques to people with cancer to help them manage appearance-related side effects of treatment. Dana-Farber’s Friends’ Place hosts LGFB sessions monthly, or visit www.lookgoodfeelbetter.org to find a session near you.

Mastectomy

If part of your treatment, mastectomy can feel like a major change to your body and how you feel about it. Reconstructive breast surgery helps many women feel better about their appearance. If you are thinking about or have undergone a mastectomy, discuss reconstruction options.
What does energy balance have to do with breast cancer?

There is a direct connection between how much energy you consume (diet), how much energy you expend (exercise and metabolism), and your weight. Researchers have recently recognized that there is a connection between this “balance” of energy (energy in – energy out = body weight) and breast cancer. Dozens of studies have shown that women who exercise more, have a healthier diet, and weigh less are less likely to develop breast cancer, and recent research shows that these factors continue to matter even after a breast cancer diagnosis. Some studies suggest that women who exercise regularly and maintain a healthy weight may have up to a 50% lower risk of cancer coming back.

We do not know yet whether there is a direct cause-and-effect relationship between healthy living and better survival from breast cancer. But there are many other health benefits of regular exercise, a healthy diet, and maintaining a lean body weight. Studies have shown that breast cancer patients who exercise during chemotherapy have less fatigue and better quality of life compared to less-active patients. Many studies have also shown that weight-loss and exercise program participation after completing breast cancer treatment leads to more energy and better mood and body image.

Given the many benefits of exercise and a healthy diet, several groups, including the American Cancer Society and the American College of Sports Medicine, have developed lifestyle guidelines for cancer survivors (http://bit.ly/1gQSm4h). These guidelines recommend maintaining weight in a healthy range, regular exercise, and a diet high in fruits and vegetables and low in fat and processed foods for all cancer survivors.

Getting started on an exercise or weight-loss program is never easy, and that can be especially true for cancer patients during and after treatment. Dana-Farber is conducting a number of studies to try to help women make healthy lifestyle changes after a breast cancer diagnosis:

The Healthy Living after Cancer Study evaluates the effectiveness of a 15-week diet and exercise program to help survivors lose weight. The program focuses on calorie reduction, improving dietary quality, and increasing exercise, and is led by a health coach and an exercise physiologist. Morning and evening sessions take place weekly at Dana-Farber.

The Exercise Metformin Study examines the best methods to reduce insulin and other hormones linked to breast and other cancers. Metformin is an oral medication used to treat diabetes that has also been linked to lower breast cancer rates. This study randomly assigns breast and colon cancer survivors to a 12-week program of exercise, exercise plus metformin, metformin only, or control.

The LIVESTRONG at the YMCA Study is exploring the physical and psychological effects of the 12-week LIVESTRONG exercise program. The study is open to all cancer survivors, at any stage of treatment. The program is offered at YMCA locations serving Greater Boston, Franklin, Foxboro, Attleboro, Framingham, and Worcester.

For more information about any of the ongoing studies, please contact Laura Shockro at 617-632-5934.
Research update

Unmet Needs of Young Women with Breast Cancer: A Focus-Group Study

To help researchers explore the experiences and concerns of young women with breast cancer, some Young Women's Breast Cancer Study participants took part in a focus group study. The results were published in December 2013 in the *Journal of Adolescent and Young Adult Oncology*¹.

Participants noted three major challenges. One challenge was feeling different from older breast cancer patients. Participants noted that a breast cancer diagnosis affected their relationship with partners, children, and other family members in ways that older women don’t usually encounter, e.g., struggling in a new marriage along with a cancer diagnosis, worrying about who will take care of young children, and having to rely on older parents to take care of them. For women without partners, dating was a major stressor for which they received little guidance. Fertility concerns, physical changes, side effects of treatment, and worrisome feelings of putting financial strain on parents were additional unique concerns for the young women.

Another key challenge was not understanding how to navigate the healthcare system and lacking educational tools specifically for them during treatment. Some women noted that if they had resources such as a case manager, access to age-relevant educational materials, and opportunities to connect with counselors and other young women with breast cancer, their experience would have been better.

Participants also articulated the challenges they felt as they moved into survivorship. Some women felt they had not been fully informed of the difficulties that may arise after treatment ends, including chronic or late effects of treatment, and felt a loss of supports they had through diagnosis and treatment. Many expected to return to their pre-treatment lives, and found it frustrating that they needed to get used to a "new normal."

Researchers used the findings from this study to help develop a randomized controlled trial of an educational project designed for young women diagnosed with breast cancer. This trial is ongoing across the U.S., and we will share additional findings with you as they become available.

Special thanks to all the young women who have enrolled in the Young Women's Breast Cancer Study to date; we hope you continue to participate.

¹To read the full study, see Ruddy KJ, Greaney ML, Sprunk-Harrild K, et. al. Young Women with Breast Cancer: A Focus Group Study of Unmet Needs. *Journal of Adolescent and Young Adult Oncology*, 2013.

Keep your style

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with a plastic surgeon. You may choose not to have reconstruction or be advised to delay reconstruction to improve your long-term results. If you don’t have reconstruction, your doctor can prescribe a breast prosthesis (a fake breast which fits inside a special bra). If you are considering types of reconstruction, talk with your doctor about what to expect from surgery and recovery before you make your final decision.

Take charge!

A breast cancer diagnosis can strip you of your sense of self and the control you have over your life. By putting effort into their appearance and style, some women feel they are able to reclaim control and counteract that sense of powerlessness. Of course, additional emotional support is also often necessary. Speaking to your care team or social worker may help.
Upcoming events

Supplements and Complementary Therapies: What’s a girl to do???
David Rosenthal, MD | Wednesday, September 17, 2014, 6–7:30pm
Join Dr. David Rosenthal, clinical director of the Leonard P. Zakim Center for Integrative Therapies, as he discusses supplements and alternative therapies during and after a breast cancer diagnosis. For more information, please contact Julie at 617-632-3916 or JLonardo@partners.org.

Breast Cancer in Younger Women: A Forum for Patients and Survivors
Friday, October 17, 2014 | Joseph B. Martin Conference Center, Harvard Medical School
Save the date for this year’s forum! More information to follow. Visit DFBWCC.org/BreastCancerForum to register. Contact Julie at 617-632-3916 or JLonardo@partners.org for more information.

Support and education

Young Women’s Telephone Support Group
Irene Goss-Werner, MSW, LICSW
For young women looking to connect with others who understand the impact of living with and beyond breast cancer. Sessions offered year-round. For more information, please contact Julie at 617-632-3916 or JLonardo@partners.org.

Facing Forward
Julie Salinger, LICSW
For patients who will complete treatment for breast cancer in 4-6 weeks or those who have completed treatment within the last 3-4 months. Sessions offered year-round. For more information, call Julie Salinger at 617-582-8081.

Inflammatory Breast Cancer Support Group
Julie Salinger, LICSW | Monthly, 2-3:30pm
This group provides a safe, supportive environment to share experiences and build relationships with others with inflammatory breast cancer. For more information, please call Julie Salinger at 617-582-8081.

Metastatic Breast Cancer Support Group
Liz Farrell, LICSW, and Fremonta Meyer, MD | Monthly, 11-12:30pm
For women of all ages with metastatic breast cancer. For more information or to register, please call Liz Farrell at 617-632-5606.

What To Do When Survivorship Is New
Wednesday, June 4, 2014, 5:30-6:30pm | Thursday, July 10, 2014, 3:30-4:30pm
This monthly educational seminar is provided by the Adult Survivorship Program for adult cancer patients who have recently finished treatment, and their family and friends. For more information, please contact the Adult Survivorship Program at 617-632-4523 or dfci_adultsurvivors@dfci.harvard.edu.