



Lymphedema Products

Living with Breast Cancer - Dealing with diagnosis and treatment

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Living with Breast Cancer - Dealing with diagnosis and treatment

More women will be diagnosed with breast cancer than any other form of cancer, almost 250,000 women in the US alone will be diagnosed. (*cancer.net*) However, as frightening as this statistic is, you should realise more people are surviving breast cancer than ever before with the 5-year survival rate now at 99%. (*cancer.net*) Whereas this is not a threat which cannot be ignored, cancer is something which, when caught early can be fought and beaten.

Recognising the signs of breast cancer

On the 27th May 2013, Vanessa felt a change in her breast tissue, she was regularly checking herself as she had a family history of cancer, but nothing changes the feeling you get when you find a lump in your breast. She immediately knew that something was wrong, that this was not just a cyst and so when to visit her doctor. Days before she had been hit in the chest by accident as someone walked into her, what she thought was a bruise from a clumsy encounter was something more sinister. She was immediately referred to hospital, where there was a thirteen day wait which felt like a lifetime, an emotional roller-coaster wanting the appointment to come sooner but dreading it simultaneously. Finally, standing outside the hospital with a feeling it had to be cancer, in the waiting room there were a number of older women, everyone assured her that she would be too young to have breast cancer, sadly, this was not the case.


Initially the consultant said it was just a bruise, but just as he finished the ultrasound scan he told her the news that it was malignant, his exact words "I'm afraid to say, You have a little cancer". Vanessa asked the nurse to hold her hand, a human touch to help her cope with the impact of the news.

"It is the feeling that, despite the fact it is you who have cancer, you have to be strong for those around you as well as yourself. It is hard to watch people around you dealing with emotional distress." Looking at the x-rays and being able to see the thing which was growing within her was sobering. "My first question was, 'am I going to die?' I was ready for whatever the answer was.

It was feeling that cancer was no longer something 'out there' which happened to other people. "Why me?" was soon replaced by "Why not me?", she felt the lack of control over what was happening was difficult to cope with.

Know yourself and check regularly

Vanessa went through treatment and is now in remission, however her message to any woman is how important regular checks of your breasts are. There are many signs, from lumps or bumps to fluid or heat. There are many great sites to advise you such as <http://knowyourlemons.com/>



Vanessa's one wish is that she could encourage more women carry out checks regularly, to make it a habit to check themselves monthly. Carry out a check on the first of the month, put it in your diary, make it part of your foreplay with your partner - "do whatever it needs, just make sure you do check".

Potential side effects of cancer treatment

Vanessa was one of the 99% - she had pretty aggressive treatment but is now in remission. It was only after treatment that she discovered she had contracted an often unspoken side effect; lymphedema.

Lymphedema can be brought on by breast cancer treatments such as surgery or radiation treatment. Lymph is the clear fluid which circulates throughout our bodies, it is vital to remove waste substances and bacteria from tissue. An Edema is a build-up of excess fluid and can occur almost immediately or even years after treatment.

The build up often occurs because the cancer treatment will often involve the removal of a number of the lymph nodes around the chest or under the arm. Even if the nodes are not removed, they can be damaged by the treatment causing the lymph to build up in the tissue, causing a range of symptoms, including:

- Aching or discomfort in the arm or chest
- Tingling or increased warmth in the limb
- Tightness or a reduction in flexibility in the joints such as the elbow or wrist
- Your bra fitting may have changed, it may feel tighter or not fit in the same way

Managing lymphoedema

Lymphoedema is sadly a condition which cannot be cured, however the swelling of limbs and pain levels can be controlled. One of the most effective treatments is use of compression garments such as a bra or sleeve. They put pressure on tissues to stop fluid build-up and encourage the lymph fluid to drain limiting the amount of fluid which builds up in the limb.

Compression garments reduces the excessive flow of fluid from the bloodstream into the tissues and encourages the fluid within the limb to move into the body where it can drain away. Additionally, the massaging effect of the garment helps soften the hard tissue which can form as part of the lymphoedema.



An example of a compression garment - this bra is designed to provide a level of compression and support which would not be found in a normal bra

http://www.lymphedemaproducts.com/images/products/compressiongarments/bras/belisse_bra_large.jpg

A compression garment fitted by a specialist will give the best therapeutic effect, starting with a few hours wear per day, you gradually increase the time worn until you can wear it for most of the day. It should be especially worn during exercise to gain the maximum effect as it will give resistance for your muscles to work against, improving the lymphatic flow.

Wear it with style!

Of course, just because you have to wear a medical garment it doesn't mean you can still be stylish! There are a number of fun and colourful sleeves which you can wear over your bandages or sleeves because treatment doesn't have to mean you have to stop being sassy!



An example of a slip-on cover for a compression garment

http://www.lymphedemaproducts.com/images/products/compressiongarments/decorative/mysassysleeve/mocha_purple_flowers.jpg

Cancer changes you...

You could not go through something like cancer without it changing you. Vanessa's outlook on life changed, but it was not in a negative direction. She lives for the day and is now doing things she would not have thought possible before and is now studying a university course in screenwriting. Check regularly, if you find something act promptly but be aware it is not the end of the world and, with support you are not alone!