

Antara Pal

“In one day, it all came crashing down”

Discovering she had breast cancer at the peak of her life devastated Antara Pal. But she fought it with unwavering resolve and bounced back even if her dreams had crashed. The brave cancer survivor accepted all the grim side effects with equanimity and grace writes **Minal Khona**

A lot of young women today put marriage on hold to focus on making a successful career in the corporate world. And why not, when women can have it all—marriage and babies—whenever they feel ready. This was Antara Pal’s plan too.

But life clearly had other plans for her. Working currently with Reliance Retail in Bengaluru as deputy GM, finance, Antara now happens to be a breast cancer survivor.

She vividly recalls, “I was in my hometown, Kolkata, at that time living with my parents. I was 39 years old and working with Spencer’s Retail Limited. On March 10, 2019, on Holi, I felt a lump in my right breast. I was not comfortable and discussed it with my mother. We decided to visit a doctor immediately. Instead of a GP, we went directly to an oncologist to be doubly sure. She suspected a malignancy from the physical examination itself.”

A mammogram and a core needle biopsy confirmed she had breast cancer. Fortunately, the staging PET CT scan did not show any spread of cancer outside the breast.



When life throws you curveballs...Antara Pal handled her breast cancer with great courage and equanimity

The shock

The news understandably shocked Antara and her mother. She says, “We were silently listening to the doctor because we had no reaction. We went through the process, came home and told my father and brother about it. Everyone was shocked, but thankfully, none of us panicked.”

There had been no history of cancer on either side of her family.

Additionally, Antara led a healthy lifestyle, with regular exercise and timely meals. She does admit to being driven and passionate about her career, however. And being an emotional person, she tended to get hurt easily.

After the devastating news, Antara acted fast. She recounts, “I remembered an ex-colleague, now a friend, who was heading the oncology division (India) at Dr Reddy’s Laboratories in Hyderabad. I called him and disclosed my medical condition and sought his advice. He asked me to come down to Hyderabad and consult Dr Raghu Ram, which I did.”

Another reason Antara chose to go to Hyderabad for her treatment was because the oncologist in Kolkata advised her to undergo a mastectomy without any delay. She felt she was being “rushed” through the treatment without any counselling.

“I was not ready mentally to lose a breast,” she reveals.

The Counselling

Meeting Dr Raghu Ram reassured Antara on multiple levels. After a thorough assessment he explained the diagnosis and the stage of the disease. He reassured her that a mastectomy was not necessary and that her breast can be preserved. She recalls, “He was very empathetic and emphasised that there

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would not be any defect in the breast after removing the lump. As the cancer was over 3 cms, he told me that I would need to be given chemotherapy prior to surgery (neoadjuvant therapy) to shrink the tumour size, which would make breast conserving surgery feasible.”

“His counselling skills are truly second to none and I must thank my stars for finding the right doctor,” she adds. Antara



Anatara’s parents stood by her and never allowed her to harbour any negative thoughts about her recovery



Antara feels she is blessed for having found the “right doctor” in Dr Raghu Ram for her treatment

was relieved of the anxiety that mastectomy is not the only surgical option. She learnt that her breast could be preserved and that lumpectomy leading to a visible dent in the breast is a myth.

Oncoplastic surgery

Further, she says, “For the first time, I heard the term ‘Oncoplastic surgery’, which involves the excision of the cancerous lump coupled with reshaping the dent in the breast so that there is no defect. This ensures a normal shape and appearance.”

Antara was diagnosed with breast cancer on March 13, 2019 and her first chemotherapy started on April 22, 2019.

As the tumour measured 3.5 cms, four cycles of neoadjuvant chemotherapy (chemotherapy prior to surgery) were given to her, which was followed by surgery on June 25, 2019.

Recalling the details about her surgery, Antara recounts how her breast cancer shrunk significantly after chemotherapy. A fine wire was inserted into her breast under local anaesthesia on the day of the surgery just prior to taking her to OR.

The wire, which acts as a guide for the surgeon to localise the cancer (which was almost impalpable) is normally done by a radiologist. However, Dr Raghu Ram, who was trained in undertaking this procedure in the UK, did it in seconds and before she knew anything, the wire was in place, she explains.

She underwent a right breast wire guided wide local excision with axillary clearance (removal of lymph nodes in the armpit). And her surgery went off well and the post-operative

recovery was smooth. “I was up and about within a few hours after surgery and went home the next day,” she recalls.

This was followed by the second set of four sessions of chemo, starting from July 19, 2019. She went back to work on September 11, 2019. Later, she had radiation therapy for a period of three weeks and completed the treatment cycle on October 21, 2019.

Battling side effects

Sadly, for Antara, while most of the boxes got ticked off, she had to reconcile herself to the many side effects brought on by chemotherapy and radiation therapy. As chemo can affect fertility, Dr Raghu Ram referred her to Dr Vyjayanthi, a fertility specialist prior to commencing treatment. “Unfortunately, my ability to preserve my fertility in the future was bleak due to my age, and my egg count was also low. All of this was very hard for me and my family to accept,” she narrates.

I always felt I had divine protection in the form of Dr Raghu Ram’s counselling and treatment. Breast Conservation Surgery (BCS) under his expert care protected my appearance and increased my confidence levels

She says with regret evident in her voice, “The day I came to know about all the adverse reactions my medical condition had triggered, I was shattered. I was at a transitional age, almost at the peak. On the personal front, I was evaluating marriage proposals to settle in a relationship and have a family. Professionally, I was moving towards a leadership role at work from mid-management level. In one day, it all came crashing down. It felt like my dreams broke like a house of cards. Accepting the fact that I can never bear a child, my sexual performance may be poor, and I may have an early menopause was difficult.”

The recovery

Several factors contributed to Antara’s full recovery. She says, “I am really blessed that my parents, my brother and my close friends were so supportive in helping me fight this situation. Not for a minute did any of them have a negative thought, and all they wanted was that I should make a full recovery. The courage and conviction which my family showed made me only stronger to fight cancer and get back to life. I always felt I had divine protection in the form of Dr Raghu Ram’s counselling and treatment. Breast Conservation Surgery (BCS) under his expert care protected my appearance and increased my confidence levels.”

Within 25 days of her last chemotherapy, Antara went back to work. She had already purchased wigs to cover her scalp



Finding her pockets of happiness by letting go the small stuff

when the hair fall started. She also slowed down a bit as her body needed time to heal physically and mentally. By the time she had her check-up in February 2020, she was perfectly fine.

Antara shares that she had kept her medical condition very private. Except for her family (parents and brother) and very few friends, and her company where she needed to disclose the fact, nobody knew about her condition. “I didn’t want to feel pitied. Also, I didn’t want to be treated differently post recovery,” she says.

More side effects

As for the side effects, besides the hair fall, Antara experienced cramps, where the hands and feet go numb, the body aches, there’s excessive itching and loss of appetite. She says, “I didn’t feel like eating at all, though I had no nausea. My hair started growing back three months after treatment. To me, it seemed like as an adult I had experienced life as a baby once again, because my parents took such good care of me. Today, my appetite is back, I regained my skin colour, but I have had an early menopause.”

On the fitness side, Antara used to play badminton and table tennis earlier; she is not allowed to anymore. The lymph nodes

in her right arm were removed, so she is not allowed to play or do anything that would lead to exertion in her right arm.

“I am allowed swimming which I love. I use my left hand more when I travel, and have learnt to work around not carrying too much stuff when I do,” she says, adding that she has to take Tamoxifen 20 mg every day to lower the risk of recurrence.

Some adverse effects get identified late—almost after two to three years. In her case, it was thyroid dysfunction, for which she now has to take regular medicines.

Living a full life

Currently, Antara is based in Bengaluru and at 43, lives a full life, despite the regrets. What advice would she give to other many young women like her, who are ambitious and driven?

She says, “Though I had regular health check-ups, I got diagnosed with breast cancer. And yet, I had no information or knowledge about the disease. I would tell everyone that it is very important to be ‘breast aware’—any new changes in the breast must be reported to your doctor without delay. Breast conservation can be a life transforming option. If you don’t know much or if you are misguided, you or your family can end up making the wrong decision because you are disheartened by the nature of the disease. Choosing the right doctor is extremely important to heal the body, mind and soul.”

She continues, “I also think, if a woman is single at 30, and she may want to marry in the future, she must conserve her eggs. Save your eggs, so even if by a stroke of bad luck, you get cancer, you have hope of having a family in the future.”

She is also a believer now in living a stress-free lifestyle. “Earlier, I used to take on a lot of stress. Now, I don’t allow little things to bother me. Besides a healthy lifestyle, reducing stress is crucial for prevention.”

Today, Antara has no restrictions in her lifestyle or diet. She has her regrets naturally, but with stoic acceptance, she has managed to find her pockets of happiness. Like she encapsulates her view on life with these words: “My parents are happy that their daughter is living a healthy life. That’s all that matters for now.” ■

‘Antara had excellent aesthetic outcome after oncoplastic surgery’

Surgery for breast cancer affects how the breast looks and feels. With advances in cancer care, it is increasingly possible to preserve the breast and ensure excellent cosmetic outcome through various oncoplastic techniques. I am delighted that Antara Pal has had an excellent aesthetic outcome after her surgery. Her unwavering resolve and indomitable spirit in the fight against cancer has enabled her to emerge as a breast cancer “conqueror”. I wish her the best of health always.

Dr Raghu Ram