

# I didn't mind losing a breast, I wanted to get rid of the cancer



At just 27, Gowthami Pooja was diagnosed with Stage 2 breast cancer. She underwent a mastectomy and chose to freeze her eggs, yet she continues to live a full life after her recovery.

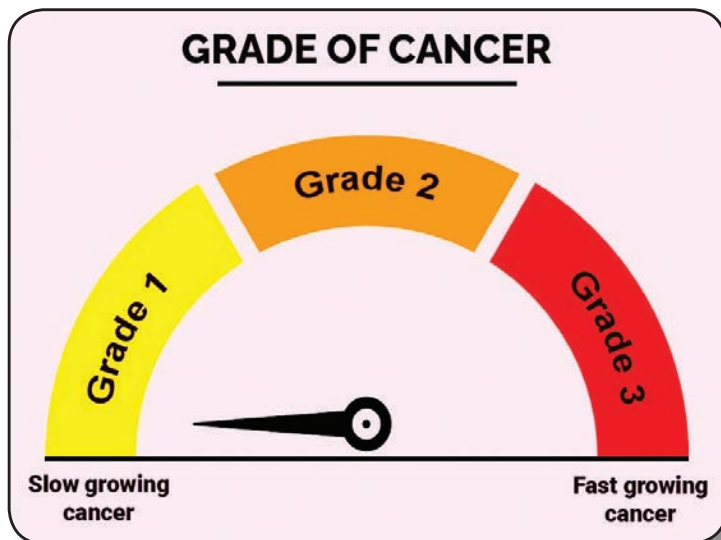
**Minal Khona**

She was working as a data analyst in Australia when she found out that the lump in her breast was malignant. Gowthami Pooja was just 27 at that time.

Having gone to Australia to study, she had got a job with the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners. It was meant to be the best years of her life when she received a shock. She was diagnosed with Stage 2 breast cancer though she had no history of cancer in the family.

Gowthami, who has recovered since then and married the man who stood by her throughout her ordeal, and lives a full life despite a mastectomy, shares details about her battle with cancer with *Pink*.

It was the second Covid lockdown. "This was around March or April 2021. I was changing my clothes when I felt a lump on my left breast. It seemed suspicious so I went to the doctor who asked me to get an ultrasound done. The test confirmed the presence of a lump, after which I had to undergo a mammogram and ultrasound



**MYTHS VS FACTS**

Breast cancer only happens to middle-aged and older women.

Younger women can and do get breast cancer.

guided core needle biopsy. The results confirmed my worst fears. I was in complete shock when I heard that I had cancer. I thought my life was going to end,” she recalls.

Gowthami also admits that she hadn’t even heard of breast cancer until then, and was only aware of blood cancer having seen it in the movies.

**Gowthami remembers being ‘terrified’ by the prognosis. “I told my parents about it and they were quite upset, because there is no family history of cancer. But my father asked me to come to Hyderabad, saying he would get the best doctor for me,” she recalls**

**Shock and terror**

Gowthami remembers being “terrified” by the prognosis. “I told my parents about it and they were quite upset, because there was no family history of cancer. But my father asked me to come to Hyderabad, assuring me that I could receive the best possible treatment here,” she recounts.

On her return to India, Gowthami went to meet the surgeon. She recalls, “The doctor counselled me well and explained all that I needed to know about the cancer in a simple and easy-to-understand format. His reassurance that everything will be well comforted me enormously.”

The repeat imaging that was done in India showed multiple abnormal nodes in the arm pit (axilla) and she underwent a PET CT scan, which fortunately did not show any spread of the cancer in her body, except in the lymph nodes in her armpit, making it a Stage 2 cancer.

“I was also counselled regarding fertility preservation and I decided to preserve my eggs as treatment can affect fertility,” she shares.

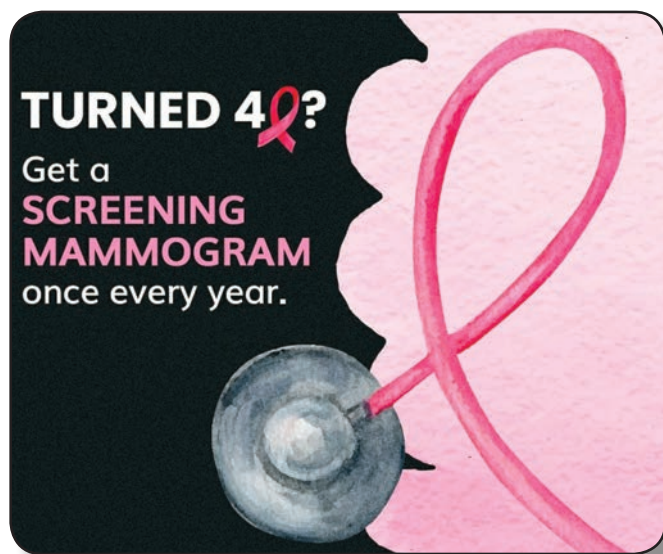
**The treatment**

Gowthami’s treatment began with chemo, followed by surgery, after which she had another round of chemo and radiation. “I was fine until the day of my surgery on July 19, 2021. But when I saw other patients waiting, I was consumed by fear. Thankfully, the robust counselling I received and the meticulous attention to detail from the multidisciplinary team helped me stay calm. My surgery went smoothly, and my post-operative recovery was equally seamless,” adds Gowthami.

One major aspect of Gowthami's cancer treatment is the fact that despite being so young, she chose to have a mastectomy instead of a lumpectomy. "Although I was counselled regarding the distinct possibility to have breast conserving surgery (lumpectomy), I chose to have mastectomy and will consider delayed reconstruction at some point in the future. The lymph nodes in my armpit were also removed, which were affected with cancer."

"I did not mind losing my breast, I wanted to get rid of the cancer," she adds.

**The medicines had more side effects in the second round of chemo after surgery. I had horrible body pain and every bone in my body hurt. My sleep routine got disrupted. I was unable to eat any spice and had ulcers in my mouth, so I used to eat Pongal and other mild food. I love food but I maintained my weight throughout, and I did not lose weight even with the change in the diet**



After four cycles of chemotherapy before the surgery, Gowthami underwent a further four rounds of chemo after surgery, with another set of medications, which was followed by a month of radiation.

#### Side effects

She recounts, "The medicines had more side effects in this second round of chemo after surgery. I had body pain and every bone in my body hurt. My sleep routine got disrupted. I was unable to eat any spice and had ulcers in my mouth, so I used to eat pongal and other mild food. I love food but I maintained my weight throughout, and didn't lose weight with the change in diet. I was also bald by the third cycle of chemo. But my hair grew back soon after the therapy ended. Though I had straight hair earlier, now it is curly."

Since she was so young, the chemotherapy and hormonal therapy affected her periods. "I didn't get my periods since I was on Zoladex injections, a drug used to suppress oestrogen production which is meant to minimise cancer recurrence. Now, after three-and-a-half years, I have stopped taking them since I am trying to get pregnant," she shares.

#### Supportive family

Gowthami points out that she was able to undergo the cancer ordeal because of her supportive family. "My husband Sudhir Marella, who was my boyfriend at that time, and my parents and sister stood by me throughout. My sister was in the tenth standard but due to Covid, she was there since the schools were shut," she says.

Sudhir and Gowthami got married in October 2021, after the last round of chemo.

Gowthami continues to work full time but has changed her lifestyle. "I've stopped eating meat completely. I eat home-cooked vegetarian food and occasionally eggs. I don't take dairy products too and don't eat much sugar anyway. I do mild cardio at the gym, and for exercise, I walk," she says.

#### Positive mindset

In the end, it is Gowthami's positive mindset and a strong will that helped her to fight cancer. "I don't have a fear of the cancer returning. If it has to, it will. Of course, I pray it doesn't but if it does, I will deal with it now that I know more about breast cancer," she says emphatically, on asked if she is worried the cancer will recur.

Indeed, fighting cancer requires extraordinary courage, and Gowthami drew deeply from her inner reservoir of strength to face it with grace and determination. ■