

# Krishma Kaur Virk

## Fighting the good fight



When a person with a healthy lifestyle and no family history of cancer is diagnosed with breast cancer, their life turns upside down. As it did with Krishma Kaur Virk; who fought the good fight as bravely as she could. Her story is underlined with hope for a full recovery

**Minal Khona**

**K**rishma Kaur Virk led a healthy lifestyle. Happily married to an army officer, Colonel Sartaj Singh, mother to a six-year-old daughter, she is a chief dietician at Hero Dayanand Medical College and Hospital in Ludhiana. A fitness freak, who only eats healthy food, she works out and cycles to stay fit.

With no family history of cancer, Krishma never expected the crab to strike. But in February 2022, cancer did strike. Krishma recalls,

“Early last year, I suddenly felt a lump in my left breast. I ignored it at first. But, I was experiencing a lot of itching on my breast.”

After two or three weeks, her mother and her husband insisted she visit a doctor immediately. Her husband was posted at Siachen at that time. When she called her gynaecologist, she asked her to get a mammogram done.

The reports came in the evening, which suggested features highly suspicious of breast cancer. Krishma says, “That is when I got worried and called my husband. Although he wanted to be with me for my core needle biopsy, due to the bad weather in Leh despite trying his level best, he couldn’t come, so my mother accompanied me for the biopsy.”

The biopsy results, which came on February 14, 2022, revealed that she had a high grade invasive ductal carcinoma. She recalls, “With no family history of cancer, I was shocked. I couldn’t think straight. At the same time, my husband got nominated for an important course that would help his career. I did not know whether to cry or be happy. I went to the gurdwara with sweets to seek blessings for my husband’s nomination, as we are Sikhs, and I prayed for myself too because I was scared.”

Luckily for Krishma, her cousin is an oncologist based in Detroit in the US. She sent him her reports and after a meeting with his team, he sent her an immunotherapy based treatment protocol.

She says, “It was a new protocol that had been created for cancer treatment. Mine was a triple negative breast cancer. This is known to be an aggressive form of cancer. I was very depressed because I kept thinking how could I – a vegetarian, teetotaler, who has always been active and led a healthy lifestyle – get cancer? I was crying all the time. My husband gave me all the support he could within the limitations of his work.”

In May, he left for Secunderabad to do his course. Krishma was with her daughter, who was five years old then, and her 72-year-old mother. They were staying in Panchkula, in a civilian area. “I had to handle everything all by myself though my husband kept checking on me. Every hospital visit involved getting tests done before the chemotherapy. Other patients used to come with two



*Krishma with her mother, who was her main support in her battle with breast cancer and stood by her like a rock*

or three attendants; I used to go alone after my husband left after four rounds of chemo," she remembers.

Krishma's mother was her main support system. Her mother, who has a doctorate in family resource management entirely took over the care of her daughter. Krishma says, "She stood by me like a rock forgetting her own ailments. My brother and his wife, would take turns flying to Chandigarh almost every week to be with me. Though I was talking to counsellors and NLP practitioners, nothing worked. I thought I was going to die."

Krishma believes her pessimistic mindset made her recovery slow at first. "Before my chemo started, my sister-in-law introduced me to Pilates (low-impact exercise that aims to strengthen muscles while improving postural alignment and flexibility) and I also started doing yoga. I would walk for four to five kms when I could," she says.

What made her change her attitude towards her disease? She says, "As a mother, when I was told I had cancer, my first thought was what will happen to my daughter if I die? I have to live for her, I thought; how long will my mother be able to look after her? My husband's postings may not allow him to be with her; and we are all the family he has. I was scared and this thought was haunting me. My child only knew that her mama was not well."

Krishma started thinking positive and believing she would recover. Though she was still depressed, what with the loss of her thick hair as well, she soldiered on.

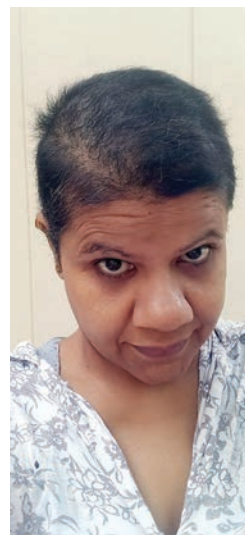
On losing her hair, she says, "As Sikhs, we are not supposed to cut our hair, but over the years, I had cut and styled them in different ways several times. When I used to comb my hair, after the chemo, it would fall out in chunks. That depressed me further. I promised myself and prayed that I would never cut my hair for the rest of my life, but that I shouldn't go bald. I was left with hair that was barely the thickness of a lizard's tail. By the grace of God, they have grown back. Now my hair is about shoulder-length."

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Krishma's travails were far from over. The chemo – eight major and 12 minor rounds – did not reduce the lump size or its metabolic activity. There were also lesions on her hip bone, indicating that the disease had spread. It had progressed to stage four.

She says, "The doctors asked me to take a second opinion, said they were sorry they could not do more and suggested palliative chemotherapy. I was heartbroken."

But always a clear-thinker, she decided that she was not going to allow her fears to manifest. She didn't want her husband to leave his course either. So, she decided to move to Hyderabad. Before that, she flew to Mumbai, to get that important second opinion from the doctors at Tata Memorial Hospital. As she was relocating to Hyderabad, they referred her to Dr P Raghu Ram (surgeon) and Dr Mounika Boppana (medical oncologist) at KIMS -USHALAKSHMI Centre for Breast Diseases.



*Krishma was upset when she lost all her thick hair but she had soldiered on. Luckily, her hair has now grown back*



*On the path to recovery: Krishma with her daughter*

After further rounds of chemo at KIMS Hospitals, the cancer was indeed gone. “My body was clear. The doctors were pleasantly surprised as it was unusual for such an excellent response and discussed further treatment options, which included surgery for my breast,” says Krishma.

Fortunately, Krishma was not worried about the surgery. Her relief and joy at the cancer not being there superseded any fears she may have had about the surgery. She says, “I remember I was crying when I first met Dr Raghu Ram. He was very gentle, humble, and understanding; it was like talking to a family member. He counselled me and discussed about the various pros and cons of surgery and surgical options.

She adds, “I don’t think my journey to recovery would have been possible without his help. Though he is such a senior doctor, he was so down-to-earth and I could talk about my personal issues with him too. I opted for mastectomy (removal of the breast) and removal of lymph nodes in the arm pit (axillary node clearance) and he did the surgery on December

9, 2022. I took permission from Dr Raghu Ram to carry my Guruji’s picture with me into the OT and he allowed me to do so. I have heartfelt gratitude and love for Dr Mounika and Dr Raghu Ram, who were there for me always and answered my never-ending queries.”

Next, she had to undergo maintenance targeted therapy. Despite radiation therapy, Krishma’s battle with cancer today is not over yet. She still takes oral chemotherapy for two weeks followed by a week’s break

**“Krishma says the cancer has taught her to think positive. She says, I have not made a full recovery yet. Some days I do feel down, emotionally. I wonder if I will ever go back to being the person I was**

She says, “I have undergone 32 chemotherapy sessions. My body is still weak and though I maintain a healthy diet, I am at times unable to take care of my daughter. My mother helps and my husband, who is posted in Mumbai, supports me. I am at home presently, but I plan to go back to my job at the hospital. The nature of my job is very intense and I have to deal with student interns and emergency cases. Since I am a little low on immunity, I will take on a role where I focus more on consulting and administrative duties.”

Krishma says the cancer has taught her to think positive. She says, “I have not made a full recovery yet. Some days I do feel down, emotionally. I wonder if I will ever go back to being the person I was. Right now, I can’t exercise much as my bones need to get stronger. I have what is called a chemo belly.” Her hair has grown back and she has to go to the hospital every 21 days.

“Whenever I visit the hospital for my follow up visits, I only wait to hear the news that I am cancer free,” she confesses.

The cancer has definitely changed her as a person. She has learnt to let go, while earlier, she was a control freak and a perfectionist. One day soon, hopefully not too far in the future, Krishma hopes that any vestiges of cancer will completely disappear from her body. ■

### ‘Krishma fought cancer with tremendous grit’



“Krishma Kaur is one of the brave ‘breast cancer conquerors’ who fought the disease with tremendous grit in the face of enormous difficulties. She came to us with reference from Tata Memorial Centre, Mumbai. Delighted that she has made full recovery. A multi-talented personality, she made this beautiful painting and presented it to me on the 10th day after her surgery! The painting depicts a butterfly, which symbolises rebirth, hope, and bravery - the power of transformation and the incredible outcome one can achieve with trust. This special gift is proudly displayed in my office.”

Dr P Raghu Ram