

What younger women with breast cancer need to know



In his quarterly column, **Dr Raghu Ram** breaks down the many challenges faced by younger women with breast cancer. Counselling is crucial for recovery in younger women, he says, since they need to tap into their 'inner strength' to fight this disease

Breast cancer has overtaken cervical cancer to become the most common cancer affecting women in India. A woman is diagnosed with breast cancer every 4 minutes and someone somewhere succumbs to the disease every 8 minutes in the country. Due to lack of awareness and absence of a robust organised population-based breast cancer screening programme, more than 60 per cent present in the advanced stages with poor survival. For every two women newly diagnosed with breast cancer, one woman dies of it in India.

Compared to the west, where most breast cancers are diagnosed after 50 years, most breast cancers in India are diagnosed in younger women between 30 to 50 years, at least a decade earlier than their western counterpart.

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Being diagnosed with cancer at a young age can be a shock and an agonising experience. The thought of having cancer may never have crossed the young woman's mind as it is a common perception that breast cancer mainly occurs in older people. A range of emotions set in.

One may find it very difficult to accept the diagnosis and often many women may question if it's really true.

Younger women diagnosed with breast cancer report a range of complex emotions including anxiety, anger and fright. Everyone responds differently and one may

have some, or all these feelings at different stages of treatment. Issues faced by younger women with breast cancer are different to those faced by older women with breast cancer.

Importance of counselling

Cancer does not just affect the body. It affects the mind and soul as well. Just treating the physical aspect does not complete the cancer treatment.

Cancer diagnosis can leave a host of problems in its wake, particularly in younger women. Physical, financial and emotional hardships often persist after diagnosis and treatment.

In my view, counselling is more than 50 per cent of the treatment and is an important component of breast cancer care. It is important to ensure that the patients and their relatives are better informed, better prepared, and importantly, feel more in control at every stage of their treatment.

Counselling involves discussion about the diagnosis and various treatment options by the specialist in a sensitive and supportive environment. Equally, adequate psychological and emotional support are provided during counselling sessions to be able to take care of the individual needs of patients and their families affected with breast cancer.

For younger women with breast cancer, there are bound to be many questions and it is crucial that they are addressed well.

Right from the point of diagnosis throughout treatment, and beyond in the face of adversity called 'cancer', a survivor comes across many difficulties. It is important to draw upon courage, determination and

perseverance to fight this disease as 'inner strength' is critical in the victory against cancer.

What are the possible questions one may want to ask the specialist?

One should feel free to ask questions to the specialist relating to various treatment options. They might include:

Why is this the best treatment for me?

Are there any options?

What are the possible side effects?

It is important to ensure that the patients and their relatives are better informed, better prepared, and more importantly, feel more in control at every stage of their treatment

Are there any short-term and long-term complications?

How will these treatments impact everyday life?

It is the duty of the specialist to clarify the patient's questions in a calm and empathetic manner and in a simple language that it becomes easy for the person to understand.

Can cancer come back?

Women diagnosed at a young age are faced with this question since they are still very young. It worries them as they can experience a relapse. The treatments offered are aimed at reducing the chance of recurrence. Most will not have recurrence if detected early. However, some do develop recurrence. I counsel my patients to focus on the importance of being positive, always.

Finally...

One size does not fit all. Every woman, more so, younger women diagnosed have a number of issues to deal with. A flexible tailor-made approach with abundant counselling will help cope with the treatment, and they can then bounce back to life after treatment.

It is important to be 'breast aware' after completing treatment. There are only two ways to fight breast cancer:

1. Women and indeed men of all ages must be 'Breast Aware' and should report any new changes in the breast to the specialist without delay
2. Women over the age of 40 must have a mammogram screening at least once in two years (ideally every year) ■



Is counselling important in breast cancer treatment?
Yes, counselling is a very important component of breast cancer care.