

# Managing Young Survivors of Breast Cancer

Melissa Simon, BSN, RN, OCN, ONN-CG

# Agenda

- Define “young survivor”
- Describe survivorship concerns and common issues among young breast cancer patients
- Discuss strategies to manage these unique issues
- Review helpful resources for patients

# Who is Considered a “Young Survivor”?

- Women diagnosed at 45 years of age or younger
- Accounts for 9% of all new breast cancer cases annually
- Estimated to have over 250,000 young breast cancer survivors currently living in the U.S.

# Five Most Common Issues of Young Survivors:

- Impaired fertility
- Early or premature menopause
- Sex, intimacy & body image issues
- Late or long-term effects of breast cancer treatments
- Need for self care & surveillance

# Impaired Fertility

- 2020 national needs assessment done by Living Beyond Breast Cancer found that only 46% of respondents reported discussing fertility impacts of treatment with their provider
- Chemotherapy can reduce the number of eggs in the ovaries or cause the ovaries to stop releasing eggs & making estrogen
- Hormonal therapy can interfere with the timing of starting or expanding a family
- Ovarian suppression protects the ovaries from the harsh effects of chemotherapy
- **Imperative to have this conversation at the initial consult & refer to a fertility specialist**

# Early or Premature Menopause

- Menopause earlier in life than expected for most women; average age for natural menopause is 51
- Natural menopause is the absence of periods for one calendar year
- Menopause caused by cancer treatment can be temporary or permanent depending on type of treatment received
- Frequently reported as **one of the most distressing results of cancer therapy**

# Signs & Symptoms of Early Menopause

- Impaired fertility
- Hot flashes
- Mood changes
- Vaginal thinning or dryness
- Bone thinning or osteoporosis
- Sleep disturbance

# Ways to manage Menopausal Symptoms

- Prescription medications for hot flashes can include low dose antidepressants, Oxybutynin, Clonidine, Gabapentin
- **Caution:** Since some antidepressants may decrease the effectiveness of Tamoxifen, always double check interactions
- Lubricants & moisturizers such as Replens & Good Clean Love
- Complementary therapies including exercise, aromatherapy, acupuncture, relaxation & cognitive behavioral therapy can be beneficial



# Sex, Intimacy & Body Image

- **86%** of women diagnosed with breast cancer under 45 report that their provider is unable to address their sexual health needs
- **40-62%** of patients report interest in sex as the most distressing issue
- Surgery can cause breast pain, loss of sensation, body image issues
- Chemotherapy can cause fatigue, decreased libido, pain during intercourse
- Hormonal therapy can cause vaginal dryness &/or atrophy

# Let's Talk About It

- Develop a system to open the dialogue with patients
- Use **open ended questions** to allow for wider responses
- Let the patient know that these side effects are common, they are not alone & there are interventions
- Be supportive & know what resources are available
- Involve other members of the care team including gynecologists, psychologists, integrative therapy specialists, nurse navigators, social workers & physical therapists

# How Can Providers Help with Sexual Side Effects?

- Provide appropriate referrals to:
  - Gynecologists that specialize in women's wellness, integrative oncology, & survivorship
  - Physical therapy for pelvic floor relaxation & therapy
  - Sex therapists
  - Vaginal laser therapy such as MonaLisa or ThermiVa
  - Psychologists or counselors for individual or couple's therapy
  - National organizations or local support groups where patients may feel more comfortable discussing these issues

# Late or Long-Term Effects of Breast Cancer Treatments

- Fear of Recurrence
- Cardiotoxicity
- Osteopenia/Osteoporosis
- Fatigue
- Memory Problems
- Neuropathy
- Weight Gain
- Lymphedema
- Secondary Malignancies
- Infertility

# This is why survivorship is so important!

Survivorship care plans provide a road map for all members of the healthcare team detailing follow up care.

You can't change the cancer treatment  
patients need...

What is the single most beneficial  
recommendation you can make?

**EXERCISE!!**

**150 Minutes a week**

**30 Minutes, 5 days a week**

**This can include walking, jogging, riding  
a bike, household chores**

# Lifestyle Tips

- Exercise: lowers the levels of insulin & estrogen, helps prevent obesity, reduces inflammation, improves the immune system, increases lean muscle & boosts natural endorphins
- Nutrition: well balanced diet, fresh fruits & vegetables, less processed foods, more water, whole grains, less alcohol
- Quit all tobacco use
- Recognize that mental health is important & take time for you

# Surveillance

- In addition to continued breast care follow up, patients also need to be aware of screening for other cancers including colorectal cancer, ovarian or cervical cancer & melanoma
- If a patient has any mutations identified in their genetic testing, there may be increased surveillance for certain types of cancer



# Having a Support Circle

- What does your support circle look like?
- This can include family, friends, coworkers, support groups, your healthcare team, or religious communities
- Ask a member of your healthcare team if there is a patient that may be willing to be a mentor

# Helpful Resources for Patients

- Living Beyond Breast Cancer, [www.lbbc.org](http://www.lbbc.org)
- Young Survival Coalition, [www.youngsurvival.org](http://www.youngsurvival.org)
- Tiger Lily Foundation, [www.tigerlilyfoundation.org](http://www.tigerlilyfoundation.org)
- TNBC Foundation, [www.tnbcfoundation.org](http://www.tnbcfoundation.org)
- Cancercare, [www.cancercare.org](http://www.cancercare.org)

# In Summary

- Allow time for patients to discuss sensitive topics
- Must have open & honest communication
- It's okay not to have to have all the answers, but you have to know how to access available resources
- Remind patients that they are not alone
- Don't underestimate the power of a good support system

# References

- Cancer.Net/survivorship
- LBBC.org
- Breastcancer.org
- American Cancer Society
- ONS.org
- Youngsurvival.org
- Cancercare.org
- <https://www.cdc.gov/cancer/ncccp/young-breast-cancer-survivors/index.htm>
- <https://www.bcrf.org/blog/breast-cancer-young-women-and-elderly-survivorship-challenges/>
- <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3755937/>

IF AT FIRST YOU DON'T  
**SUCCEED**  
TRY DOING WHAT YOUR  
**ONCOLOGY**  
NURSE TOLD YOU TO DO  
THE FIRST TIME