

# StarSpecial

## BREAST CANCER AWARENESS

# Conquering the fear of a breast cancer diagnosis

GETTING diagnosed with breast cancer can be frightening. No one deserves to hear this from their doctor. However, Subang Jaya Medical Centre consultant breast and endocrine surgeon Dr Daphne Anthonysamy says the first step that a patient needs to take is to accept their breast cancer diagnosis.

“It is the most difficult thing to do, I’m not going to deny that. However, the moment a patient accepts the diagnosis, that is the time they can move forward. What they need to know is that it is treatable and there are people around that can help them get through the process,” she says.



Dr Daphne Anthonysamy.

### Debunking the myth

There is no denying that there are some patients who still feel fearful of getting their treatment after the diagnosis. Patients need to be brave to take the first step as this is for their own lives. Breast cancer is so common and there is no way of preventing it. It can happen to anyone regardless of what their background is.

Dr Daphne clarifies that not all patients with breast cancer would receive the same type of treatments in their journey to get better. There are a lot of things that need to be considered before doctors can suggest suitable treatments for breast cancer patients. “There are so many ways of treating breast cancer. However, not everybody will have a standard treatment plan as everybody’s treatment is individualised.”

The most prevalent myth of breast cancer which people always hear about is that patients will lose their breast if they are diagnosed with breast cancer. Dr Daphne strongly dismisses the claim by explaining that the

removal of a breast is not always the case. “If you get diagnosed early and there is only a small lump, the surgery you would need to undergo is called a ‘lumpectomy’ – where surgeons will remove the lump together with a small margin of normal tissue to ensure that the cancer is completely removed.”

During the lumpectomy, a sentinel lymph node biopsy is also done and, if suitable, intraoperative radiotherapy is given to the patient.

Nevertheless, there are some patients that need to have their breast removed because of multiple cancerous lumps found in their breast, larger tumours or having positive BRCA or breast cancer genes. Doctors would then suggest for the patient to go for a mastectomy instead of removing just the lumps.

Even should this be the case, breast cancer patients must not lose hope. Those who undergo a mastectomy will have the option of doing breast reconstructive surgery immediately. “How we reconstruct is by reusing tissues

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either from the tummy or back, or to use an implant. These are the ways of reconstruction that can be done immediately when we do a mastectomy. So, they do not have to feel as if they will lose their breast at any point.”

Other typical worries that doctors always hear after breaking the news to their patients is whether they are going to die from this cancer. Dr Daphne emphasises that being diagnosed with breast cancer does not equate to a death sentence. “If you got diagnosed early and get it treated appropriately, there is a high possibility of being cured. So, the chances of living a full life after a diagnosis of breast cancer are very possible.”

Patients would also be concerned on whether they can go back and function like normal after the diagnosis. Dr Daphne says, “Most patients that have completed their treatment go back to society to how they were before. In fact, they are much stronger than they were before the diagnosis.”

### Complications are rare

Like in any other procedure, patients will always worry about the complications they may



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experience if they ever go for surgery. Dr Daphne explains that breast surgery is not considered as one of the major surgeries performed by medical personnel. “The breast itself is a superficial organ. So, in a general context, the risk is very minimal. I usually tell my patients about the risks of wound infections and developing hematoma after surgery. However, those are very minimal risks.”

The recovery process is vital for a patient who goes through the surgery. Dr Daphne notes that breast cancer patients can look forward to a very speedy recovery process since it is not a major surgery, but points out that some stiffness in the shoulder should be expected. “Usually, patients will be up and about the day after surgery. However, do expect some stiffness underneath the arms as that is the area where lymph node dissection is done. There will be a nurse that comes and teaches them exercises to ease the stiffness.” Otherwise, Dr Daphne says they can go back to their usual daily activities with not much lifestyle changes required.

### Support systems are important

No patient should be alone in their journey to get better, hence why support systems are so important. Support systems that have counsellors and nurses as

part of the team can help breast cancer patients in expressing their worries and concerns over their diagnosis. Patients will learn how to take care of themselves post-surgery, besides being given contacts for non-governmental organisations such as Breast Cancer Welfare Association Malaysia which offer support to breast cancer patients.

There are breast cancer survivors who give talks to newly diagnosed patients about their journey with breast cancer. This will be insightful for breast cancer patients, so they do not have to feel like they are alone in their struggles.

“It is regrettable to see that some people are getting afraid to examine their breast because of the possibility of finding a lump there. Even if they find something, they do not want to come forward and seek treatment because they are afraid of being told that it is cancerous. So, women need to overcome that fear because when there is a chance to treat it early, you should grab the opportunity and not let it go to waste,” Dr Daphne says.

Dr Daphne advises patients not to be afraid of getting their first treatment. “Treatments for breast cancer are widely available in government hospitals, as well as private practices,” she adds.

■ For more information, call 03-5639 1212.



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