

## Research and Discuss Breast Cancer Treatment Options

Once the first sign of breast cancer is detected and confirmed, it's important for women to research and discuss with their partners and health-care providers what their options are as far as treatment is concerned as soon as possible. It can be more than a little overwhelming, however, as it seems the possibilities are endless for women nowadays when it comes to breast cancer treatment—of both the disease, the symptoms associated with breast cancer and the side-effects of medication. Personal research into the options available is recommended, as well as thorough discussion with a doctor or health practitioner. A woman's age, whether she is a first-time breast cancer patient or it is recurring, the specific type, stage, grade and locality of the breast cancer, and the individual risk factors—as well as other health issues she may have—all must be taken into consideration. Probably the most commonly used as well as the most well-known treatment options are surgery, radiation therapy and chemotherapy. These are still considered to be very effective, but many other treatment options are gaining in popularity, such as herceptin, tamoxifen and other types of hormonal therapy, as well as alternative and complementary therapies. Most women choose a combination of therapies. Surgery is almost always recommended as one of several treatment options for first-time breast cancer patients. The two different types are lumpectomy, or “breast-conserving surgery,” which involves surgically removing the tumor and some surrounding healthy tissue in the breast, and a mastectomy, which is the surgical removal of the whole breast. There are many factors that come into play when deciding between a lumpectomy and a mastectomy, such as the chance of recurrence, and considering radiation therapy and breast reconstructive surgery. Radiation therapy is often used in conjunction with surgery. After a lumpectomy the whole breast is “radiated” with high energy x-rays, used to kill cancer cells, and after a mastectomy the lymph nodes and chest wall may also be treated. Although radiation does produce side-effects and symptoms, these are usually localized, and this form of treatment is usually well tolerated. Chemotherapy, also very common and widely used, involves the use of medications to destroy cancer cells by interfering with its growth. However, it can also kill healthy cells and cause undesirable side-effects in women, such as fatigue, nausea, vomiting, increased risk of infection and hair loss. Herceptin is a treatment given intravenously into the bloodstream once every one to three weeks, targeting only HER2 (a protein)-positive breast cancer in women with metastatic (advanced) disease, medium to large tumors and cancers with lymph nodes involved. Hormone therapy is also sometimes used—by pill or injection—if the breast cancer tumor is sensitive to the hormones estrogen and/or progesterin. Hormone therapy will reduce the availability of these hormones, “starving” the cancer and hindering its growth. Tamoxifen is one such drug under this category, prescribed for women with hormone-receptor-positive breast cancer. Tamoxifen is the hormonal drug of choice for pre-menopausal women but has been shown to be slightly less effective in post-menopausal women than other hormonal therapies, like aromatase inhibitors. Alternative therapies to treating breast cancer are becoming more popular, either used instead of or in addition to conventional methods. However, there has not been enough clinical research to support their effectiveness and safety. Such alternatives include acupuncture, meditation and therapeutic touch, flaxseed and black cohosh, and special restrictive diets. It is vital for women considering alternative therapies to research these options as much as possible and to consult their health-care team, as they should be doing with any combination of the above-mentioned treatments for breast cancer.

## About the Author

Stuart Satterfield offers massage therapy and bodywork. Swedish, deep tissue, acupressure, Thai, energy work, and vibrational.

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