

Cancer Answers

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Bridges to Beauty, Ltd
www.bridges2beauty.net
caring1@bridges2beauty.net

Me and Breast Cancer - Part II

...last month. It was the night before my mastectomy and although I knew God was in control and had peace about that, I was not at all certain what lay ahead for me.

Because I am involved in the entertainment industry as a model and actress, I felt it was important to have my breasts "attached" to me at all times. I knew there would be times when the garment I was to model could not be worn with a bra. That, and the fact that I was relatively young at age 40, convinced my husband and me to take the reconstruction route. We also decided to begin reconstruction at the same time as the mastectomy.

The surgery was a success and the weeks that followed were filled with varying degrees of physical pain, laughter, crying, praying, encouragement from friends and family, and the beginning of chemotherapy. I will move quickly past this part of my journey for sake of space. Suffice to say it was a time of immense growth emotionally and spiritually.

(The only reason I include this next part is that it is part of my story – not because I want to place fear or concern in anyone's mind.)

Just a few short days after my second chemotherapy treatment I began to run a high fever and my affected arm became quite weak. I had already begun taking neupogen shots because my white blood count was very low. Honestly, I thought all that was wrong with me was I needed my daily shot as I lay bundled on the couch that evening waiting for what seemed like forever for my husband to come in from work. This was just four days before Christmas and he worked for UPS...consequently he was working very long hours. When my husband came in and kissed me, I was burning up with fever. He immediately took me to the hospital where I was admitted. They knew I was infected with something – they just did not know what or where the infection was.

Believe it or not...there is a very cool twist to this story! Getting an infection (which turned out to be a staph infection in the axillary incision) SAVED MY LIFE! Once they did all my blood work, they discovered that my spinal cord was shutting down. I was probably within twenty-four hours of death, because I was allergic to either one or all of the chemotherapy drugs. Had I not started running a fever – I never would have been taken to the hospital – I would have lay at home and died. God was really watching over me!

My chemotherapy was stopped short. There were no oral hormonal medications available at that time...and so I ended the first leg of my cancer journey. Over the next five years, I had four tumors in the remaining breast that were either benign or pre-cancerous. All were palpable – not one was detected by diagnostic tests. Because of my history with difficulty using diagnostic tools and chemotherapy intolerance, my surgeon suggested that I have a second mastectomy in 1999. His words were, "You are a time bomb waiting to go off".

Me and Cancer, conclusion

My husband and I made a decision to do a prophylactic mastectomy in June of 1999. Shortly after that, I began the reconstruction process again, finishing in January of 2000. My lymphatic system and kidneys became weakened due to a subsequent sepsis infection from a skin graft taken to rebuild my areola and I found myself battling lymphedema of the trunk. Although I continue to battle this to the present, I have found great help and relief from many avenues. (I share some of these in chapter 9 of "A Woman's Cancer Journey primer.")

Since spring of 2000, I have been in full remission. Praise God! I stay vigilant and am always conscious of any changes in my body. I am so blessed to be living a full, active life.

Start a New Thanksgiving Tradition

After dinner on Thanksgiving ask, "Did everybody use a fork?" When they look puzzled but nod, say "Good. Before we all leave the table, I want to hear some good, fun, magic family memories. Here's the "Talking Fork". I'll go first." Then pick up a fork, around which you've tied a ribbon - and begin.

...make certain that everyone applauds each person as they finish, no matter what he or she says. Mom, Dad, and grandparents can model how it's done for the kids. Try stories about your childhood. Or stories about how another relative had quirks, funny sayings, or adventures. Or you can tell stories about your own children and the day they were born or the origins of their pet names. Once the kids realize that telling a story like this is simply remembering things and talking about them in their own words, they'll jump in.

...sit back and enjoy the stories.