

Survivorship Program

Provides Support to Breast Cancer Survivors

By Suzanne M. Spiry

Of the 11 million cancer survivors living in the United States today, over 2 million are breast cancer survivors, and breast cancer survival rates continue to increase due to better screening and treatments.

“Most women diagnosed with breast cancer today have an 80-90 percent chance of being alive in 10 years,” says Grace Makari-Judson, MD, medical director of the Comprehensive Breast Center, part of the Baystate Regional Cancer Program. “An improvement in survival of two percent a year over the past decade is the result of better screening and more effective treatments.”

While the large number of survivors is reason to rejoice, the question arises: Who will care for them? “Breast cancer survivors need to be especially vigilant about their health, yet due to the critical shortage of both medical oncologists and primary care physicians, there are fewer providers,” says Dr. Makari-Judson.

For this reason, Baystate’s Comprehensive Breast Center now offers the Breast Cancer Survivorship Program. The goals of the program include:

- Proper follow-up to detect local or distant recurrence.
- Proper follow-up for second cancers.
- Management of health issues that may be a result of treatment.
- Promotion of wellness.

Before entering the Survivorship Program, women will have completed active treatment at the D’Amour Center for Cancer Care. They will then revert to annual visits to the Comprehensive Breast Center, where the focus will be on prevention and health maintenance, rather than active treatment. For many women, this begins after the five years of hormonal treatment.



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Women in the program are seen by Sandra Hubbard, WHNP, and Catherine Tipton, NP, who are trained in health maintenance and symptom management. “Our focus is on wellness,” says Ms. Hubbard. “During each visit, we discuss breast, heart, and bone health; how to avoid weight gain; and how to manage menopausal symptoms without using estrogen. We also update the patient’s family and personal medical history, address any concerns they may have, and perform a breast exam.”

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“Breast cancer survivors still need yearly mammography as well as clinical breast exams,” says Ms. Tipton. “For their convenience, we try to schedule their mammogram at the Comprehensive Breast Center the same day as their follow-up visit.”

“This program provides a much-needed bridge for breast cancer survivors from their medical or surgical oncologist to a nurse practitioner who can address their unique concerns and ongoing wellness,” says Dr. Makari-Judson. “It also enables survivors to hear about new recommendations. Because there is so much information in the news, women need someone knowledgeable to say ‘yes, this is important for you’ or ‘no, this doesn’t affect you.’”

Wellness Program

As emphasized in the American Society of Clinical Oncology Guidelines, women generally don’t need other tests, such as blood tests or scans for monitoring. Women do need to focus on their overall health. For this reason, the Comprehensive Breast Center offers a Wellness Program, run by Christine Carpenter, wellness coordinator, and funded by Rays of Hope: A Walk Toward the Cure of Breast Cancer. Women are eligible for this program after their surgery or they complete their chemotherapy.

This program, offered at no charge at the Comprehensive Breast Center, provides breast cancer survivors with the tools they need to live and maintain a healthy lifestyle. Participants meet weekly for six weeks to discuss health and nutrition, stress management, and physical fitness. Ongoing wellness programs are offered twice a year for patients in the Survivorship Program, with workshops coordinated by Ms. Carpenter.

Rays of Hope, A Walk Toward the Cure of Breast Cancer, funds several projects to improve the breast health of people in western Massachusetts. To learn more, visit baystatehealth.org/raysofhope.



Continued Vigilance

Dr. Makari-Judson and Wilson Mertens, MD, medical director of the Baystate Regional Cancer Program, recently published a review of the features of second breast cancers, and found that they were generally smaller size and earlier stage than the first cancer.

“This serves to emphasize the importance of ongoing surveillance,” says Dr. Makari-Judson. “The yearly visits are also a good time to update each patient’s family history, since any new cancer diagnoses may change the likelihood of a hereditary cancer syndrome. Breast cancer survivors with hereditary syndromes, like BRCA-1 and BRCA-2 may have higher rates of second breast cancers.”

Since the Institute of Medicine has deemed survivorship research a high priority, Dr. Makari-Judson has also initiated a new research study that uses a questionnaire for breast cancer survivors to gain information about their prior treatments, attitudes, and unmet needs.

“Most women will survive breast cancer,” she says. “The goal of our Breast Cancer Survivorship Program is to provide education, health maintenance, and preventative services to this growing sector of our community. We want to provide breast cancer survivors with all the tools and resources they need to live healthy lives long into the future.”

For more information,

or to refer a patient to the Breast Cancer Survivorship Program, call 413-794-9338. For the Wellness Program, call 413-794-2316.



Annual Survivors’ Day Celebration

“Our community has celebrated survivorship for 12 years now through our Annual Survivor’s Day, funded by Rays of Hope,” says Sandra Hubbard, WHNP, coordinator of the event.

Each year, 250-300 breast cancer survivors come together in the Spring for a fun and informative day that celebrates their lives and provides them with an opportunity to learn the latest news about breast cancer, recovery, and ongoing wellness.

This year’s event, held at the Sheraton in Springfield, featured keynote speaker Lillie Shockney, RN, BS, MAS, the administrative director of the Johns Hopkins Breast Center, and a University Distinguished Service Assistant Professor of Breast Cancer, who discussed “The Value of Humor when Confronted with Breast Cancer.”

Participants were also able to select from a variety of workshops on topics ranging from genetics and environmental concerns, to healthy cooking, stress management, and relaxation techniques. Two workshops were also offered in Spanish.

Women also enjoy the opportunity to bring a friend and connect with other survivors while enjoying exhibits, a healthy continental breakfast and luncheon, and socializing.