

Understanding the Unique Challenges Faced by Women with Breast Cancer

- Dr. Vani Parmar

When it comes to treating breast cancer, I've learned that the journey is much more than just a medical one. It's deeply personal, especially for women who already carry so many responsibilities. Over the years, I've been fortunate to learn a great deal from my patients, like Ruby, who've taught me that treating cancer isn't just about addressing the disease itself—it's about understanding and supporting the whole person.

In my 25 years of handling breast cancer cases, I've seen how the perception of treatment has changed, especially among women. While men can and do develop breast cancer, they account for only about 0.5% to 1% of cases. Despite the low incidence, the emotional toll can be significant, especially for men who may feel isolated due to the rarity of the disease in their gender. However, for women, the challenges are different but equally profound.

Women often prioritize their families over their own health, placing their needs last. While this selflessness is admirable, it can lead to delayed treatment, often until the disease has advanced. The consequences of this delay extend beyond the woman herself—it impacts the entire family. Women are often the backbone of the household, and when they fall ill, the entire family structure can be disrupted. Who will care for the children, manage the household, or handle the countless daily activities? This burden doesn't rest solely on the woman; it affects everyone who depends on her.

In India, the peak age for breast cancer is below 50, a time when women are usually at the height of their responsibilities. A diagnosis at this stage doesn't just challenge the woman physically; it disrupts the entire household. The stress and fear that accompany a cancer diagnosis are compounded by worries about the family's well-being.

So, how can we address this? The answer lies in support—support from society, from family, and from the medical community. We need to assure women that they are not alone in this battle. A positive attitude is crucial, not just for the patient but for everyone involved in her care. Caregivers, family members, and healthcare providers all play a role in maintaining a positive outlook, which can significantly impact the patient's ability to cope and recover.

Stress is another critical factor that cannot be overlooked. There's no doubt that stress plays a role in both the incidence of cancer and the outcomes of treatment. Many patients have shared that they experienced significant stress or life changes before their diagnosis. While anyone can develop cancer, regardless of their emotional state, it's clear that stress can hinder the effectiveness of treatment. Managing stress is essential because it can create barriers to healing. The same treatment can be more effective if the patient is less stressed. As my colleague Dr. Sudeep mentioned, reducing stress is crucial for better treatment outcomes.

This is where integrative cancer care becomes so important. By incorporating stress management and holistic support into the treatment plan, we can improve not only the quality of life for breast cancer patients but also their treatment outcomes. This approach ensures that we're not just treating the disease but also addressing the emotional and psychological needs of the patient, helping them to navigate this challenging journey with as much support and positivity as possible.

Ultimately, treating breast cancer is about more than just medicine. It's about understanding the unique challenges that women face, providing the support they need, and ensuring that they never feel alone in their journey. By doing so, we can help women not only overcome the disease but also live fulfilling lives beyond their diagnosis.



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