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## The First Steps after a Breast Cancer Diagnosis

**1. Stay calm (if you can).** For most women, the reaction to a breast cancer diagnosis is understandably one of shock, concern, and even panic. But it's important to try to find some way to feel hopeful and optimistic too. Cure rates for breast cancer have never been better. When breast cancer is detected early, survival rates can be higher than 90 percent, and in cases of DCIS, survival can be as high as 99 percent. If at all possible, try to remain calm. Working with doctors who instill this sense of calmness and confidence in your prognosis will help; right from the start, don't choose any doctor who doesn't make you feel this way, who does not explain next steps in a way that makes sense to you, or who does not allot you enough time to answer all of your questions. Finding some sense of calmness comes with many benefits—after all, no one finds it easy to make important decisions under extreme amounts of duress. As you move forward, a calmer state of mind will allow you to process information, think more clearly, and make better decisions for yourself about your care.

**2. Find the right team.** Breast cancer care is multidisciplinary, which means that different doctors from different disciplines (surgery, medicine, radiation, plastic surgery, and others) may be involved in different aspects of your care. And just to make it potentially more complicated, the number and types of different doctors and specialists that may be involved with your care will vary from person to person and from case to case. Not *all* women need to see *all* these different types of doctors. That's why navigating your path through breast cancer can be particularly confusing and overwhelming, but with the right guidance it's not. To start, it's important to know that almost all treatment for breast cancer is sequential. For example, if it's determined that you'll need surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation, you'll get these treatments one after the other, not at the same time, and therefore will have a sequence of different doctors running the show at different points in the course of your care. Who comes first? How do you make your way from one doctor to the next? you will learn about the order in which you will be likely to meet and interface with the members of your treatment team—including breast surgeon, plastic surgeon, medical oncologist, radiation oncologist, and others— because even at the outset, when you've just been diagnosed, you'll want to assemble a team that you feel confident and comfortable with. I'll explain how.

**3. Do everything you can to see doctors who specialise in breast cancer.** When patients are taken care of by doctors that treat more cancer—known as high-volume breast surgeons—the results are better. In one study investigating breast surgery outcomes related to volume, only 7 percent of surgeons met the criteria for performing a “high volume” of breast surgery (more than fifty cases per year), and only 25 percent of patients had their surgery performed by a high-volume breast surgeon. The other 75 percent had surgery with a medium- to low-volume surgeon, many of whom performed fewer than two breast procedures per month. Here's why that matters: those patients who went to high-volume breast surgeons were significantly more likely to be offered and receive the most advanced breast surgery options, and thus better treatment. It makes sense: the more experience someone has regularly performing a task—whether it's a haircut, a business deal, or a particular type of surgery—the higher likelihood of a better result. Along these lines, some patients incorrectly assume that all surgeons have the same level of expertise- they don't!

This is particularly true for breast cancer care today. With all the advances that have already been made, all the different treatment options out there, and more progress occurring each year, there *is* so much to know and so much to keep current on when it comes to breast cancer (you should see the stack of medical journals and publications on my nightstand). So if at all possible, avoid doctors who “dabble” in breast cancer care as part of their practice. The doctor who dabbles, treating only a few patients per month or even per year, may not have the up-to-date knowledge base to provide the best recommendations for treatment. For most doctors, high volume is usually achieved by becoming a breast specialist. A specialist is someone who, after receiving general training, goes on to get additional, advanced fellowship training in one specific area, or someone who chooses to focus his or her practice on one particular disease or organ system. So breast cancer care is best provided by specialists who have chosen to focus *only* on breast cancer in all its forms and all its treatments.

With each member of the team, if at all possible, it'll be key to find a specialist: someone who focuses primarily or completely on breast cancer within his or her particular field. So a breast radiologist spends most of his or her time looking at mammograms and all of the other imaging studies related to diagnosing breast cancer. A breast surgeon is a surgeon who devotes most if not all of his or her practice to performing breast surgery. Seeking out high-volume specialists is one way to stack the odds in your favour for getting the best breast cancer care.

**4. Along the way, make sure you choose doctors you feel you can work with to make decisions.** When you are diagnosed with breast cancer, you will have many choices to make: Lumpectomy or mastectomy? Chemotherapy or no chemotherapy? What about additional treatments? And so many more. More than with any other disease type, decision making in breast cancer care is often *both* medical *and* personal. As I frequently tell patients, "I may be the expert in cancer, but you are the expert in *you*." And because we're talking about an area of a woman's anatomy that is both extremely visible and very personal (and often an essential part of her sense of herself as woman), there's a huge amount at stake. When you get the information you need provided by the right specialists, you can feel calm and optimistic, which in turn will maximize your chances of making the best decisions, for now and for your future.

**5. Know that it's not an emergency situation.** It's hard *not* to imagine that cancer is growing and spreading by the minute, the hour, and the day, and most women and their families believe that when you are diagnosed with breast cancer, time is of the essence. It's important to know that this is not how cancer works. The only forgiving thing about a diagnosis of breast cancer is that it usually does not constitute a medical emergency. Breast cancer is not like appendicitis or a bowel obstruction, where you need to act within hours or else risk dire consequences. While many patients have visions of the cancer running wild and spreading throughout the body even in the time it takes to read an article in your doctor's waiting room, the fact is that even the most aggressive newly diagnosed cancer does not grow or spread in a day, a week, or even a month; it takes a much longer period of time. You may be surprised to learn that even a cancer that seems to have just "popped up out of nowhere" has grown over the course of months to years. With rare exceptions, a new breast cancer diagnosis is not a medical emergency, so it's okay to take a deep breath and allow yourself some time to formulate a plan. Taking a week or two to consider your first steps and to arrange appointments with the right doctors in the best places, rather than taking the first appointment with whomever you can get, will not jeopardize a good outcome in any way. Don't feel desperate to get in to see the first doctor who will give you an appointment; it is certainly safe to wait days or weeks to get to the *right* doctor. This does not mean you should delay treatment for too long. Once you've identified your plan of action, there's really no reason to wait. All that said, waiting can prolong the psychological agony. Ideally, you want your surgery or treatment to begin within four to six weeks of diagnosis.

**5. Always, always, always remember that no two cases are the same.** The only way to determine what's right for you is to arm yourself with the facts, discuss them with a doctor you trust, and then listen to *your own voice* above all. With breast cancer, every case is different. And even two women who *seem* to have the same diagnosis may have cases that differ in subtle ways that make a big difference in treatment options or recommendations. Because of this, there is a limit to what one can learn about her disease from the internet, an article, or even a friend who seems to have "exactly the same thing." I think it is safe to say that when it comes to breast cancer, one size does not fit all—it doesn't even fit most. As one of my patients said to me relatively soon after her diagnosis, "If I hear one more person tell me what she would do if she were me, I am going to lose it! How does anyone know what they would do if they were in my situation? And even if they were in the same situation, they're not me!" So in this book, you will learn how to get the facts that pertain to you and your case, which will enable and empower you to move ahead with your care.

**6. Focus on what matters and tune out the background noise.** How do you do that when there *is* so much information out there? It's unrealistic to expect to insulate yourself completely from the onslaught of information and advice headed your way, but you need strategies for how to maintain optimism and a positive outlook in the face of the storm. How do you do that? By learning to let some of the information roll off you, by differentiating fact from fiction, and by getting a preview of the many myths out there related to breast cancer, and understanding how to dispel them. And if you can succeed finding the right team, making sure your doctors are specialists, and having medical providers you're comfortable with—the number of questions you need to research on your own should be reduced, *and* you will have reliable, trusted specialists in your corner to turn to with your concerns.