

A photograph of a family of three—a woman, a man, and a young girl—standing outdoors on a wooden deck. The woman, on the left, has long dark hair and is wearing a pink shirt. The man, on the right, is wearing a straw hat, sunglasses, and a white t-shirt, and has a large tattoo on his left arm. The young girl, in the center, has long dark hair and is wearing a light-colored top. They are all smiling at the camera. A semi-transparent teal banner is overlaid at the bottom of the image, containing the title text.

# Not Just A Patient, Also A Parent





# TABLE OF CONTENTS

1

Introduction

2

Being a Mother with a Breast Cancer Diagnosis

6

I Am A Mother With Cancer

9

Joycelyn's Cancer Journey

12

Laughter Really is the Best Medicine

16

A Mother and a Young Patient

19

"Mommy Has Cancer": The Most Difficult Conversation to Have

23

Breastfeeding Following a Breast Cancer Diagnosis

30

My Beautiful Baby Saved my Life

37

Parenting in the Midst of Trauma





Women are multi-dimensional and getting a breast cancer diagnosis does not change that. It doesn't stop mothers from being mothers, daughters from being daughters, sisters from being sisters, etc. While a breast cancer diagnosis may put a pause on things such as your job and careers, some of the multi-dimensional roles and responsibilities that women play in life continues. One of these roles is being a mother. The stories in this magazine were put together between 2020 and 2023, and we would like to thank everyone who contributed.



# Being a Mother with a Breast Cancer Diagnosis

In honor of Mother's Day 2020, we had asked breast cancer patients to share with us the age at which their children were, when they were diagnosed with breast cancer. We also wanted to know how breast cancer impacted their life as a mother, and vice versa. For Mother's Day 2023, we are re-sharing those responses.

## **Christine**

She was 13. That was 12 years ago this November. Scary, but she was a trooper. She was by my side all the time. She went to chemo and radiation with me. She wanted to be in the room when drains came out. I guess that is why she is a Health Care Assistant now. I love her to bits. She was right there for me through it all. As I said, I believe this is why she is so caring and went into healthcare. I could not be prouder of her. I can't think of any 13-year-old who would want to come to appointments and hold your head while you are getting sick. She is my rock.

## **Cathie**

Two and three... 10 years apart 76 / 86. I told them the truth. I told them I'm going to be a warrior and fight this bad illness, not just for me but for everyone. They loved it when I dressed up as a hero. They dressed up with me, our costumes were fun and made us laugh.

## **Olesya**

My daughter was a 19-month-old and still nursing when I found a lump. When she turned 22 months old, I had to wean her within a week due to diagnosis of triple positive breast cancer and upcoming surgery. I was 34 years old at a time of diagnosis in November of 2017. I didn't tell her yet that I had



breast cancer. She knows that I was sick and now I take medicine to stay healthy. The cancer was stage IIA. She is four years old now. She will have to be aware of possible genetic predisposition, but I don't think I will tell her until she is in school, and until she starts asking questions ;).

### **Renee**

I was diagnosed with Stage III breast cancer. My daughter was 10 years old. I am a single mother. Her fear was that she didn't want to be an orphan. I told her we are going to keep things normal and do things like regular. I had chemo immediately and worked all the way through. Then I had a mastectomy and radiation, I worked all the way through the radiation as well. It was hard but I wanted to be strong for her. I think I was in a fight/flight mode. Now, six years later, the fear lingers. It still bothers her now and I'm looking into counseling for her. I find that there is not a lot of support for survivors.

### **Lee**

I gave my grown kids very little information. I just told them I had breast cancer and that they (the two young women) should have regular cancer check-ups. I had the tests, a positive was confirmed. About a week later I had a lumpectomy and two weeks after that I was on a plane to Australia to visit one of my daughters.

### **Jill**

Eight, ten, and six weeks. The hardest part for me was having to stop breastfeeding. Honestly, she was such a huge source of love and light during my treatments - she lifted me up so much with her bright innocence and big smiles.

### **Sharon**

When I was diagnosed with a rare breast cancer just over two years ago, my children were 60, 51, 56 and 45. My 51-year-old



daughter was diagnosed with a different type of breast cancer (BRCA1 mutation) at age 50. She has two children, ages 31 and 30 at time of diagnosis. I had surgery and removal of an odd breast cancer (signet ring cell carcinoma) and radiation, both with no problems.

### **Julie**

When I was initially diagnosed in December 2008, I was 37 and my youngest boy was not quite two years old. My older son was seven and my daughter was nine. It was rough. Trying to care of them whilst going through surgeries and chemo without my family living in the same city was extremely stressful. My youngest didn't get the attention he needed, I didn't get the rest I needed, my husband was angry and without support, which made it harder for me. Unfortunately, I found out in December 2017 that it had metastasized. By this time my children were 10, 15, 17 and at the age to really understand the severity of it all. The trauma of having the doctors tell them to say goodbye to their mother in the ICU caused PTSD in one of them. While I can rest to some degree now, I still have to run a house, though they give me great inspiration to keep trying and never give up. I am determined to make it to see my youngest boys high school graduation. After that, it will all be gravy.

### **Ann**

22 and 25. They were my rocks, my champions. They told me, "whatever happens, we'll get through it together". I cried more upon hearing this (tears of joy), than when I was told "you have Stage III cancer" (tears of fear).



## **Janice**

My eldest daughter was 32 years old and six months pregnant with her first child. My second daughter was 30 years and eight months pregnant with her second child. My third daughter was 27 years old, and was scheduled for surgery on her rotator cuff. My son was 25 years old and was away tree planting. I had scheduled time off to help with each of my daughters, how ironic that I ended up having a mastectomy and they all were trying to take care of me instead of me taking care of them. In fact, my second daughter, who is a nurse, was in my hospital room making sure my dressing was right and the surgeon told her she just needed to concentrate on having a baby! My son did not make it home until I was out of hospital and helped out at home as my husband was busy running his business which required his time 24/7. Somehow it all came together with everyone's help and I have been cancer free for three years this coming July.

# I Am A Mother With Cancer

*By Michele MacDonald*

I am a metastatic breast cancer patient with liver and spine metastases. I am also a mom and a grandmother. One day, I felt a very hard pea-sized lump right under the skin. My family physician sent me for a mammogram and ultrasound. The radiologist came in and said he was concerned and brought me back the following day for a biopsy. I was diagnosed with invasive ductal carcinoma. I was petrified and scared. Since working at a cancer centre, I had every bad scenario going through my mind. I had a double mastectomy followed by four months of chemotherapy and seven weeks of radiation. It was difficult losing my hair, feeling nauseous and weak but I was determined to beat this horrible disease.





I worked in oncology for 16 years helping cancer patients access chemotherapy that is unfunded. I also co-founded Oncology Drug Access Navigators of Ontario (ODANO) to which I am so proud of. I lost my mother at the age of nine and it was incredibly difficult growing up without her. Now that I am palliative, I keep thinking about leaving my girls. I never thought I would be in this position. It turns your world upside down. My daughters are 29 and 31 and my granddaughter is three. She gives me a reason to smile everyday. I did see them grow, finish school, get married etc., but my heart is breaking everyday at the fact that I will be leaving them. It never is easy. We spend as much quality time together as possible, although chemo has left me quite tired and fatigued. I try to look strong, and fierce. I hide my true feelings and pain so that I don't burden my friends and loved ones. I am lost without my career and I'm passing over my director role in ODANO to focus on what I love the most in this world: being a mom and a grandmother.

My husband couldn't deal with the diagnosis and left me while I was still undergoing treatment. Mentally I was a mess dealing with my disease and worried sick about how I was going to now support myself. Was I going to be able to return to work? Thankfully my two daughters have been by my side the entire time never complaining. I have the most amazing group of friends who come over almost daily to check on me. I'm very blessed with the support to have.

After 30 years of marriage my ex and I do not speak. I have an amazing boyfriend of five and a half years who I can depend on emotionally, mentally, physically, and financially. My friend group is made up of many RN'S so that is definitely helpful, and my oncologist is also a personal friend; he gives me hope but he also gives me honesty.

***It's important to advocate for yourself. Ask questions: know what is going on, what is the next step, what can you expect. Be prepared.***

The cancer came back in my liver and spine in 2020. I initially went through DD-ACT, radiation and surgery, now I am on my fifth line of therapy for metastatic disease. My children are very strong independent individuals, but this has been incredibly hard for them. We went as a family to plan my funeral; that way they won't have any worries or stress when the time comes.

It's important to advocate for yourself. Ask questions: know what is going on, what is the next step, what can you expect. Be prepared. Stay strong, stay positive but most importantly, ask for help if you need it. Don't try and do everything if you're not up to it. Talk to others in the same situation for moral support. I try to love life and live for today; don't look back and ask, "what if?" Keep your chin up and fight like the badass you are!





## Joycelyn's Cancer Journey

Joycelyn Merkley, from Shelburne, Ontario, describes herself as: a girlfriend, mother, grandmother, sister, and daughter. She has lived 53 years embracing these roles when in July of 2021 she was thrown into another role: breast cancer patient.

After a routine mammogram detected a tumour, she was

diagnosed with stage I, grade 2, HR-positive, HER2-negative breast cancer on July 6. Just over two weeks after her diagnosis, on July 22nd, Joycelyn had breast cancer surgery followed by 20 rounds of radiation. She's now taking tamoxifen for five years to help prevent a recurrence.

"I noticed something different in my breast before my mammogram. I just thought it was a part of aging. I wish I had acted on it."

How did she feel when she got the diagnosis? "Very emotional. I had difficulty digesting the information. I felt very overwhelmed and very uncertain about my future."

While it all happened so fast, Joycelyn feels fortunate that she has received great care from her family doctor, her oncologists, and her surgeon. But managing her emotional well-being has been the most difficult part of this journey for Joycelyn. She's suffered from

anxiety, panic attacks and insomnia since her diagnosis. She worries for her children, and their well-being. She feels uncertain about her future. And she is surprised by how frequently women are being diagnosed with breast cancer.

To improve her mental health, she has started cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) through her family health clinic and has embraced mindfulness practices as well. Her family and her friends have also been a source of emotional support, along with her partner who has remained positive in the midst of hardship and uncertainty. Working on her mental health has become her biggest priority.

She encourages every person who may be facing a breast cancer diagnosis to be their own advocate and put themselves first, "Don't be afraid to ask for help."

Apart from her emotional well-being, Joycelyn has also suffered from physical side effects of her treatment. She's experienced some lymphedema and uncomfortable side effects from the tamoxifen. Exercise, physiotherapy, and

***She worries for  
her children,  
and their  
well-being.  
She feels  
uncertain  
about her  
future.***



massage therapy have helped her manage these side effects.

With the help of a broad and supportive network of fellow breast cancer patients and survivors, she has begun to learn more about this disease, the different types of breast cancer, and how it can affect each person in unique ways. She would like to see that all women aged 40 and older are able to receive routine mammograms across the country and she hopes for more education and awareness around dense breasts.

Ultimately, she wishes for a cure for all types of cancer. But until that day, her key message to other men and women newly diagnosed with breast cancer: "Educate yourself regarding your diagnosis, treatment and recovery."

Her motto: Be Kind.

***Educate yourself regarding your  
diagnosis, treatment and  
recovery.***

# Laughter Really is the Best Medicine



*By Amy Smart*

When faced with the worst moments of life, we have two choices: lie down and die or stand up and fight. This was never truer than when I received my breast cancer diagnosis. I knew I had no other choice than to fight it with a smile on my face and as much positivity as I could muster – even if I had to fake it to make it, as they say. My

boys looked at me with fear in their eyes and sadness in their hearts. This would be a defining time in their lives. I was (and still am) determined to make it a teachable moment: how to face life's adversities and how your mindset can change everything, a lesson we could all learn.

**“Hey, at least I’ll get a new set of twins outta the deal.”**

The silver lining for a middle-aged divorcee.

Being small chested, I had often contemplated breast implants over the years, especially after two children, being almost 40 years old and recently becoming single after over a decade of marriage. My cancer diagnosis gave me the push I

***My boys looked at me with fear in their eyes and sadness in their hearts.***



needed to plan for the bigger, perkier breasts I had always wanted. Sure, I had to remove the ones I had first, but cancer couldn't have all the fun! And think of the new wardrobe that would follow. When I met with the plastic surgeon to "try on" my new pair, it was the first moment of actual excitement without the underlying current of fear that I had had in months.

That initial glimpse of a silver lining set the tone for how I would walk through this journey with laughter and a positive attitude.

**"Mommy, are you gonna lose your hair on your no-no square?!"**

Oh, from the mouths of babes.

I would like it noted that I have no idea where my kids got the term no-no square, but I think it adds that extra touch of something special to this particular moment in time. We were going for a walk around our block, as we do every night. It was early spring with beautiful weather. Our neighbours were all out enjoying the sunshine. Chemo would be starting in a week, so I was trying to explain to my boys that I would lose my hair. Of course, they had so many questions – will I lose my brows and lashes, what about my arm hair, and so on. We walked in silence for a few minutes as they thought about all that I had told them. When my four-year-old suddenly stopped, turned to me wide-eyed and asked (you guessed it), "Mommy, are you gonna lose your hair on your no-no square?!" I tried to shush him, which only made him question me more. He was insistent like only a four-year-old can be, that I give him an answer. I know my neighbours overheard this little interaction, the smirk across their faces said it all. After I started losing my hair, I couldn't walk past them without turning some shade of

***“Get yourself a lint roller, or four.”  
...also known as the number one piece of  
advice I would get during my journey.***

red. I was certain that conversation was on repeat in their mind at the very sight of my balding noggin.

**“Get yourself a lint roller, or four.”**

...also known as the number one piece of advice I would get during my journey.

Losing my hair was an awful thought that brought me to tears more than once. In some ways, it felt like a bigger loss than the loss of my breasts. I remember talking to another breast cancer survivor about starting to lose my hair. When I mentioned my plan to shave my head, she immediately suggested I stock up on lint rollers. Although I didn't really get why, I heeded her advice. And thank goodness I did! I lint rolled everything – and I do mean everything. That thing rolled across my head to stop those little needle hairs at the source, across my neck and shoulders, and even rolled across my pillow daily as part of my bed-making routine. Now when they say you will lose your hair, they mean ALL your hair. And I did (except my leg hair, I'm still upset about that let down – I was promised no leg shaving over summer, and chemo did not deliver on that promise). However, chemo did deliver on the free Brazilian promise, albeit not all at once.

And let me tell you, that lint roller came in handy there too. I stood in the bathroom buck naked, lint roller in hand, looking like a nearly hairless cat. As I silently prayed that my kids

wouldn't walk in at that moment, I shrugged and went to town rolling that sticky paper every which way until the hairs that were barely hanging on finally let go of their tiny (yet annoyingly painful) grasp.

They say laughter is the best medicine. If I take away nothing else from this journey I'm on, I hope I take away that. Because it is the truth. Finding those moments that I can laugh (even if it's sometimes through tears) has helped me stay strong mentally and emotionally which ultimately has helped me stay strong physically. Even on the worst days, I remind myself that I am not this moment, tomorrow will be better.

If you take away one thing from my story, let it be the ability to always find your silver lining. And remember, you are not this moment either.

***Finding those moments that I can laugh (even if it's sometimes through tears) has helped me stay strong mentally and emotionally which ultimately has helped me stay strong physically.***





## A Mother and A Young Patient

*By Jessica Clements*

I am 33-year-old woman from Alberta, Canada. I used to work in the oilfield until I had my son in September 2021. I used to be very independent, and an active dog mom to four dogs. I am now a proud mom of five dogs and one tiny human! I found a lump at two months postpartum but thought it was a blocked milk duct. It kept getting bigger, so I went in on February 28, 2022. I was sent to get an ultrasound and a mammogram on March 1 and 2. I was biopsied on March 4, and my pathology report came back on March 21. I was diagnosed with invasive ductal carcinoma.

Becoming a new mom was a lot of change, adding breast cancer on top of that when your baby is only five months old is

tragic. Your mind is always thinking is this the last birthday I'll celebrate? Is this the last time I'll see him eat breakfast in the morning? I do have support and people to help me with my son, but I mostly take care of him by myself. I do think my son came at the right time as life knew I needed a purpose in order to fight the battle I never knew was coming.

I started with six rounds of doxetacel in May 2022 to shrink the tumor as it was 7cm. Surgery on October 7 and 31 for a left breast mastectomy and immediate reconstruction with nipple sparing. I still went for hormone therapy with Herceptin every three weeks. I had 16 days of radiation in December 2022. Currently I'm doing Kadcylla every three weeks due to residual cancer. Losing my hair was the hardest thing for me. The way people look at you when you have no hair makes you very uncomfortable.

Physically, I can't keep up with my toddler like I would like to. I went from an active lifestyle to choosing when I can do an activity. Financially it has been the hardest. Making sure you have gas to go to your appointments, and food for your family. Money for meds so you can make sure the side effects are easier on you. My relationships with others are extremely strained, lots has changed. I have lost a few people and have gained some really great people as well. Work wise- I will not be able to return to my normal job which is very hard to accept. My outlook on life has changed because I look at every moment like it may be my last.

My partner and I went through a lot of ups and downs. We just recently got back together as I made rash decisions while dealing with postpartum depression and my cancer diagnosis. Family members look at me differently now but are

supportive. Friends that know me are very supportive and the true ones have shined through this dark time. Mostly everyone that found out I had cancer was in disbelief. Not something you would think a new mom would have to go through.

I have a cancer mentor that has helped me. I also have my sister, dad, papa, aunts, cousins, and some very close friends that have been there since the beginning that check on me and motivate me to keep going. My biggest motivation is my son. Take every picture you possibly can because in those dark moments when you think you can't keep going, that will help you to come back and realize what's worth fighting for. Remember, there is a huge community of pink sisters waiting to cheer you on. Reach out to us. Advocate for yourself and realize there are more options.

***Take every picture you possibly can  
because in those dark moments when  
you think you can't keep going, that will  
help you to come back and realize  
what's worth fighting for.***



# “Mommy Has Cancer”: The Most Difficult Conversation to Have



*By Natalie Kwadrans*

In February 2019, five days after my birthday, I found a tiny, split pea lump in my right breast. I immediately went to my GP, who sent me for a mammogram and ultrasound. The first available appointment was the following week. The mammogram went “squishingly” and then I was shuffled off for my ultrasound. Afterwards, the technician told me they needed to

review the images with the radiologist to make sure they had everything they needed. I didn't really think twice about it as that seemed to be the normal practice during my pregnancy. The radiologist came in and told me he was extremely concerned with what he was seeing and wanted to do two things:

1. Immediately refer me to Alberta Health Services' Breast Health Program and,
2. book a biopsy, which they could do on-site at the radiology clinic I was at.

He said he would send everything to my GP, but this would expedite the process, so I didn't have to wait on speaking to my GP once he got the results. They had a spot for a biopsy early the following week. I was supposed to travel for business, but now I was

worried. I took the appointment and subsequently cancelled my business trip. I'm glad I followed my gut. It turned out that I had stage IV de novo (meaning "at initial diagnosis") metastatic breast cancer (MBC). How could this be? I was "too young" to get breast cancer and didn't qualify for a mammogram unless I found something. Which I did. And it was terminal from the moment I found it. I was given two to three years to live. I was floored.

I went home and told my husband at the time. We struggled to figure out what and how to tell our two and a half-year-old son and five-year-old daughter the news. We decided to wait until I could speak with the Psychosocial Oncology department and connect with Wellspring Cancer Support Alberta. Wellspring had some age-appropriate books we could read to the kids to explain that I was sick with a disease called cancer, explaining what it was, and the impact treatments would have on me. My son was too young to really understand, but my daughter was terrified and full of questions.

Since my diagnosis, I've struggled to find resources to prepare myself and my family for what lay ahead. I'm not referring to treatment plans and side effects. Those were clear! I'm talking about the impacts to my larger family, such as how my young kids processed what was happening, the impact to my entire family's life because of the ups and downs as I went through during the various treatments, impacts to friendships for both my kids and I, fear of the unknown and what would happen, etc.

***My son was too young to really understand, but my daughter was terrified and full of questions.***

Last year, I took a course called “Digital Storytelling” through Wellspring Alberta Cancer Support. I decided I would tell a story about an incident that happened to my daughter because of my cancer. Because it was about my daughter, I wanted to make it kid friendly, and that is how the animated cartoon strip idea came about. But as I built it out and got feedback from the Wellspring facilitators, other cancer patients who are parents of young children, and professionals in the oncology field, I was encouraged by the feedback. What was supposed to be a simple video has somehow transformed itself into a larger project.

## MAKING MEMORIES

It isn't  
always  
easy but  
we try!





While there are a ton of resources that explain cancer and treatments to a child whose parent was diagnosed with it, I wasn't able to find anything that talks about what and how their parent's diagnosis will impact them. That's when I decided to make this the first of many stories, and it will be the beginning of the "[Mommy Has Cancer](#)" series. This series will follow the lives of fictional characters Val (mom), Isabelle (daughter) and Simon (son) as they learn about the changes and reality of living in a family where their mom has cancer. I wanted to give other children living with a mom diagnosed with breast cancer a resource, and I wanted to leave my children a legacy and something they could turn to after I was gone.

These stories are intended to help parents have age-appropriate conversations with their children about potential experiences they may face, emotions they may have or changes they may see. I would have loved to have access to something like this when I got my diagnosis. It's hard enough having cancer. It's even harder parenting (and in my case now, single parenting) while going through treatment. If I can make one family's life easier because they had insights I now have, then I will be successful.

*"Mommy Has Cancer" is a free resource. You can find links to the comic and YouTube videos, along with Natalie's blog, at [MommyHasCancer.ca](http://MommyHasCancer.ca).*



# Breastfeeding Following a Breast Cancer Diagnosis



Breastfeeding has been linked to a few health benefits such as its ability to **reduce the risk of being diagnosed with breast cancer**. This may be because of reduced exposure to estrogen as well as the shedding of breast tissue. But what happens when breastfeeding cannot reduce your risk of breast cancer because you have already been diagnosed? While breastfeeding comes with its own challenges, having a newborn while dealing with a breast cancer diagnosis comes with its own unique complications. One of these is knowing whether you can breastfeed your child and how to go about it.

### **Surgeries, treatments and when you can breastfeed**

Whether you can or can't breastfeed depends a lot on the type of cancer treatment or surgery you receive, and, in these cases, it is still advised to discuss with your primary care physician about the best route to take. We begin with treatment and surgeries where you won't be able to breastfeed, followed by those where the decision is made on a case-by-case basis.

#### *Double Mastectomy*

Breastfeeding is not possible with a double mastectomy as there are no milk ducts left following this type of surgery.

#### *Hormone therapy*

Long-term drugs, such as Tamoxifen or trastuzumab, **get into breast milk** and therefore, if you are on these, you will not be able to breastfeed your child.

***But what happens when breastfeeding cannot reduce your risk of breast cancer because you have already been diagnosed?***



### *Chemotherapy*

If you are currently receiving chemo, you cannot breastfeed. Chemo drugs kill rapidly growing cells and are therefore very toxic. Since these drugs can get into milk, it is not advised to breastfeed.

If you were on chemo, some time will have to pass before you can breastfeed, in this instance, ask your primary care physician, OB-GYN, child's doctor, when you can safely begin breastfeeding. This ensures that you would have allowed for enough time for the chemo drugs to leave your system. If you do not have to wait a long time, you might be advised to “**pump and dump**” first, before nursing your baby right away.

### *Lumpectomy*

Depending on how much breast tissue was removed, you should be able to breastfeed following a lumpectomy. With a lot of breast tissue removed, you may not produce a lot of milk but should be able to breastfeed from the untreated breast. If the milk from one breast is not enough, you might want to consider using formula as a supplement or seeking out a **breast milk donor**. Your doctor or a breastfeeding coach should be able to provide you with help on the appropriate step to take.

### *Single mastectomy*

A mastectomy involves removing only the affected breast, so breastfeeding is still possible from the unaffected breast. Once again, consider supplementing with formula if the milk from one breast is not enough and reach out to a breastfeeding coach or a lactation expert for more guidance.

### *Radiation*

While it is considered safe to breastfeed if your breast cancer is being treated by external beam radiation therapy, it is best

*As always, your primary care physician will provide you with the best steps to take. Speak with them about the treatment and surgeries available to you to understand how this will affect your ability to breastfeed.*

to check with your primary care physician first, before doing so. In some cases, radiation can damage breast tissue, making it that the affected breast produces little to no milk. In this case, you can nurse from the untreated breast and use formula if the milk is not enough.

### *Anesthesia*

It is generally safe to breastfeed following anesthesia as it does not get transferred into milk.

### **Good breastfeeding practices**

As always, your primary care physician will provide you with the best steps to take. Speak with them about the treatment and surgeries available to you to understand how this will affect your ability to breastfeed. While breastfeeding is a special bonding time for you and your child, your health and the baby's health are most important. While you can keep in mind how your treatment and surgeries will affect breastfeeding, it is important to go with the best option in treating your breast cancer.

If you are able to continue breastfeeding but don't have enough breast milk (which may be the case if you can only

breastfeed from one breast) you can use formula as well as breast milk. If you go this route, you can look into getting a supplemental nursing system (SNS). This is a device where a narrow tube is taped to your breast, near your nipple, with the other end connected to a bottle of formula. If you have been breastfeeding and need to stop, it is better to wean your child than to just stop, if this is possible. This ensures that you do not have to deal with engorgement or mastitis. Lactation specialists can provide you with a schedule for weaning and pumping to reduce these risks. If you can't breastfeed your child and your main goal is to have a breastfed child, look into breast milk donation.

Whichever route that you take, know that you are not less of a mother because you are unable to breastfeed your child or because you require extra precautions. Even without the added concern of a breast cancer diagnosis, new moms deal with various complications when it comes to breastfeeding. As long as your child is loved and being cared for, where their nutrition comes from is secondary.

***While breastfeeding is a special bonding time for you and your child, your health and the baby's health are most important.***



## Resources to Get You Started

### *National*

Canadian Lactation  
Consultant Association

La Leche League  
Canada

### *Alberta*

Alberta Health Services  
– Lactation Services

Alberta Independent  
Registered Lactation  
Consultants

Northern Star Mothers  
Milk Bank

Riley Park Maternity  
Clinic

### *British Columbia*

British Columbia  
Lactation Consultant  
Association

BC Women's Provincial  
Milk Bank

### *Manitoba*

Foundations Birth  
Services

The Birth Centre

Winnipeg Breastfeeding  
Centre

### *New Brunswick*

Government of New  
Brunswick –  
Breastfeeding Support  
Services

### *Newfoundland and Labrador*

Baby-Friendly  
Newfoundland and  
Labrador

### *Northwest Territories, Nunavut and Yukon*

Monarch Centre

Whitehorse Health  
Centre

### *Nova Scotia*

Good Latch

The Nurturing Touch

## *Ontario*

Bilingual Online Ontario Breastfeeding Services –  
IB Certified Lactation Consultant

Telehealth Ontario

The Rogers Hixon Ontario Human Milk Bank

## *Prince Edward Island*

Health PEI - Breastfeeding your Baby and Baby  
Friendly Initiative

## *Quebec*

Association Québécoise des Consultantes en  
Lactation Diplômées de l'IBLCE

Héma-Québec – Public Mother's Milk Bank

Institut national de santé publique du Québec -  
From Tiny Tot to Toddler

## *Saskatchewan*

Saskatchewan Lactation Consultant Association



**My Beautiful Baby Saved my Life**



*By Samantha Chinn*

I remember sitting in the small room waiting for the doctor to come in. I was nervous but didn't think anything was wrong. The doctor came in and asked how I was. I gave my usual cheery response that everything was good but added that "it depended on what he was going to tell me...ha ha ha". I laughed but my jovial manner quickly subsided when my doctor sat down and the words "it's not good" came out. My heart dropped. He then said, "It's cancer". My heart dropped again.

I was 31 and eight months pregnant. After feeling a lump in the shower, and having an ultrasound and then biopsy, I was diagnosed with invasive ductal carcinoma, grade III of 3, 1.5 cm diameter, estrogen receptor positive, progesterone receptor positive, HER2 positive.

My immediate concern was for my little bundle in my belly, Sophia. The doctors reassured me that everything was okay with Sophia and that the tumour wasn't affecting her in any way.

### **Evicting Sophia**

Being diagnosed when I was pregnant definitely added extra complications to treatment. I had originally planned to use a midwife for delivery; however, being high-risk meant I needed to switch over to an OBGYN quickly. The second issue

***My heart dropped. He then said, "It's cancer".  
My heart dropped again. I was 31 and eight  
months pregnant.***

was that Sophia needed to be evicted from her current home early so that I could have surgery as soon as possible.

After a discussion with my surgeon over concerns for an immediate induction (more than six weeks early), he was happy to let Sophia stay in my belly for as long as I was waiting for the genetic test results, which bought me an extra four weeks.

My OBGYN was really great and was happy to wait to induce me until just a few days before my scheduled surgery – this meant that Sophia was only two weeks early and didn't have to spend any extra time in the hospital. This decision could have backfired had I needed to have a C-section or had complications from the delivery, but everything went smoothly, so my surgery date wasn't affected.

In a way, I was lucky that I was diagnosed towards the end of my pregnancy as it meant I was able to deliver at full term. Had I been diagnosed very early in my pregnancy then my options would have been completely different – I may have even had to have the breast surgery or start chemotherapy treatment while pregnant, which wouldn't have been ideal.

### **Genetic testing**

A few days after I was diagnosed, I had a genetic test done to understand whether my cancer was hereditary or not. The main genes tested for were BRCA1 and BRCA2 mutations. Luckily, I was negative for the BRCA gene mutations, which was great news as this meant that I hadn't passed the mutation on to Sophia.

### **Induction and surgery**

I was induced two weeks before Sophia's due date and all went well (once I had the magic pain relief anyway!). I now had

my special bundle in my arms and she was perfectly healthy. I was scheduled to have surgery a couple of days post-delivery, but it got delayed a week as my genetic test results weren't in.

My surgery went well, and I healed up nicely. I was supposed to refrain from picking up Sophia for one-to-two weeks to give my stitches a chance to heal, but I challenge anyone to resist picking up their little newborn for such a long time. I obeyed the doctor's orders for the day of surgery – Simon, my husband, just popped Sophia on top of me for a snuggle that evening. After the first evening I couldn't help myself and completely didn't abide by the instructions. I am usually a good patient and follow the doctor's orders, but I felt like I was able to hold Sophia as she was so small and light.

### **Breastfeeding**

Before I was diagnosed, I was really hoping to be able to breastfeed Sophia. This became a big decision for me in relation to my surgery options of lumpectomy vs. full mastectomy. As my genetic tests

***Before I was diagnosed, I was really hoping to be able to breastfeed Sophia. This became a big decision for me in relation to my surgery options of lumpectomy vs. full mastectomy.***



were negative for the BRCA gene mutations, this ruled out the requirement for a full mastectomy, which increased my options for being able to breastfeed. I later opted out of the optional mastectomy.

I was luckily able to breastfeed for the first five days, which enabled me to provide Sophia with colostrum (an important part of breast milk for newborn babies). After this, I developed mastitis and had to go on antibiotics to reduce the swelling in my breasts and get rid of the infection. My lumpectomy surgery delay turned out to be a blessing as I needed the extra week for the antibiotics to work their magic and get everything under control so that I could have the breast surgery as planned.

Although I wasn't able to breastfeed beyond the first five days, I was fortunate to receive breast milk from my local breast bank, NorthernStar Mothers Milk Bank. Typically, this service is intended for premature babies where the mothers are unable to breastfeed due to the baby being too premature, but they made an exception for my situation and generously donated three months'-supply of milk.

## **Treatment**

After I recovered from the surgery, I started my chemotherapy (every three weeks for four cycles) and Herceptin (every three weeks for 17 cycles). After that, I had a few weeks to recover before starting radiation treatment (while still having Herceptin treatment). I had radiation every day for four weeks, excluding the weekends. Sophia and Simon kept me company for my chemotherapy treatments, but obviously weren't allowed to be in the room during radiation treatments.

***I am a pretty positive person and I truly believe that you can, and should, find a positive in any bad situation.***

Simon and I have really great supportive family and friends that helped us through this journey. My family all live back in the United Kingdom (except for my sister-in-law who is also in Canada), but they all took time out of their busy lives to come over (on multiple occasions) and help Simon and me out, which was just amazing. Most importantly, I couldn't have navigated my way through this "bump in the road" without the love and support of Simon; he is truly my rock, and one amazing dad!

Sure, it wasn't ideal timing, but in a way, it was easier to deal with recovering from the surgery and chemo etc. while Sophia was so young as she slept through most of it. Had I been diagnosed now that Sophia is 18-months-old and super active, that would have been a whole other level of exhaustion to deal with.

### **Positivity**

I am a pretty positive person and I truly believe that you can, and should, find a positive in any bad situation. For me, I focused on my beautiful little girl who had saved my life, as had I not been pregnant, my tumour probably wouldn't have grown so quickly for me to notice the change. It's not easy to juggle treatment with a newborn baby but Sophia was a great distraction from everything.

Throughout my journey, I was inspired to create a blog, and it has been very therapeutic for me to tell my story and share my experience and tips. It will also serve as a good journal for when the time comes for Simon and me to tell Sophia the story about how she saved my life.

During my treatment, I often joked that life threw me this additional curveball as Sophia was such a good baby and I needed an extra challenge to deal with. While I didn't love the challenge, I faced it head-on. Life is looking good, and I am making sure to treasure each and every day that I have with Simon, Sophia, and Bertie, our adorable English bulldog.



# Parenting in the Midst of Trauma



*By Rebecca Wulkan*

My oldest son is 17. Then 14, and 10- and six-year-old twins. While I don't claim to be any kind of parenting expert, I've had enough experience now to know a thing or two.

My favourite learning over the years has been around Systems Theory. Family systems in particular.

Now before you cry boring, and run away, give this a chance.

In a system, we all affect each other. If you've ever woken up to a grumpy spouse or worked with a miserable co-worker, you know what it feels like to be affected by someone else's

mood. If you're the one having a bad day, I guarantee that everyone around you is going to feel the brunt of it too. Whatever system we're a part of, we're all affected by each other.

So, what then happens in a house of seven people when the crap cancer diagnosis comes down the line? The system erupts; there is too much anxiety for the system to contain and we are at each other's throats.

My first doctor phone call came in June 2020. He was the one to confirm that my biopsy was positive for cancer cells. My heart beat faster, my stomach flipped around and all I wanted to do was to curl up in a ball on my bed. But I had five kids to feed. Five kids to mother. Five kids whose lives wouldn't be the same after I shared my bad news. Not only would I have to manage my own grief, but I would have help six others manage their own grief. And in the moment that I shared the news, our system changed.

Telling our kids that their mom had cancer sucked. My husband and I took turns fielding questions, but it was apparent that grief and fear had struck instantaneously. Over the next month, we tiptoed around each other. The kids weren't totally comfortable with me, I wasn't comfortable with myself and my husband was uncomfortable with just about everything. Fights were breaking out and patience ran thin. Our system was starting to malfunction.

As with any new diagnosis, doctor appointments, blood tests and scans become routine. I felt like I was taking off my shirt for anyone and everyone for those few weeks. And it was in one such appointment (my PET scan to be precise) that we discovered that my cancer had spread to my bones.

System failure!

Over two days, I spent four hours on the phone with my oncologist during which time I asked her how to tell my kids that their mom is dying. Her answer, "Just tell them the truth."

That family meeting didn't go super well. I didn't tell them that I was dying but I did tell them that I was no longer curable... just treatable... and that I'd have cancer for the rest of my life.

And as a mom, standing at the centre of the system, a pillar in our family, I had to wear my grief on my sleeve as I mopped up the tears of my kids. I had to become vulnerable and admit weakness to match their pain...and they hated me for it. They hated that I had become sick. They hated that I couldn't fix myself. They hated the thought that one day I'd be gone.

It has been a tough few months. Awful really. There is trauma and PTSD in our household, and we struggle with anxiety in a soul-destroying way. But with time, something else has happened too, something with our family system. We've noticed that when one person shares a smile, the rest of us smile. When one of us laughs, we all laugh. When one person admits

***I didn't tell them that I was dying but I did tell them that I was no longer curable... just treatable... and that I'd have cancer for the rest of my life.***



sadness, we gather around for a hug and a cry. As one shows vulnerability, the others show grace. And this is what's turning our trauma and anxiety into something new and even life-giving. A family system that is working for the good of the family.

When I can be a mom that shows up calm and connected to my kids, I take back the steering wheel and drive our family back to smoother roads. When I let them see my sadness, I am offering them the opportunity to learn empathy. When I allow them to be angry, I am allowing them space to grieve.

Our family system is slowly becoming a system for nurturing and curiosity. A place for growth and exploration. A place for failure and grace and compassion. And as our fears subside, we are able to affect each other in beautiful, positive ways, building a system that is strong enough to withstand any storm.

***When I can be a mom that shows  
up calm and connected to my kids,  
I take back the steering wheel.***



Stories matter

***Our Voices*** is a place for breast cancer patients to share their experiences in their own words and to inspire others. The best stories focus on one specific aspect of the cancer journey. For example, you may want to talk about tips for dealing with cognitive difficulties that come from chemotherapy, or organizing a team of friends and family to support you during treatment. The choice of topics is yours and the length can be as short as one page.

Before you start writing, send a brief description of your story idea to us at [cbcn@cbcn.ca](mailto:cbcn@cbcn.ca), and we'll give you some more specific writing guidelines. Interested in sharing your story but don't know how to get started? Use our [submission template](#) and we'll put your story together for you.

The breast cancer community will look forward to reading your story!



## Order Our Resources

Finding reliable information on breast cancer can be overwhelming. We have produced various reports to help you understand your breast cancer diagnosis better. These resources are available online or in print.

[Order our resources today!](#)

## Subscribe to Our Newsletter

CBCN Connected is our monthly digital newsletter which gives updates on our activities, educational events, and resources. We also give updates on metastatic breast cancer with our mBC Connected newsletter.

[Subscribe to our newsletter today!](#)

## Become a Supporter

No one should face breast cancer alone. Donations from you help to provide patients with a supportive community that she/he can turn to for quality information, education and support.

[Become a supporter today!](#)

**Connect With Us!**



[@theCBCN](#)



[@CBCNetwork](#)



[@CBCN](#)



[cbcncan.ca](#)



[cbcncan@cbcncan.ca](#)