

Breast Cancer Survivors

How they hit back

These women should be primping for dates, building their careers, or chasing after toddlers. Instead, a surprising number of women are spending their 20s and 30s battling breast cancer. Here's their story of survival.

By Shivani Sen and Neeti Jha



Getting the bad news they went through the whole nine yards—denial, anger, bargaining, depression and finally acceptance. But heck, these gutsy women picked themselves up, brushed off the dust and today they're determined, not just to survive but also to emerge stronger, ready to live a new and a better life. *Women's Health* brings you their stories from the trenches.



Sujatha*
(name changed)

Her day job: A hospital administrator
Home: Hyderabad
Diagnosed with bilateral invasive ductal carcinoma, at age 25

While having her bath one day, a year into her marriage, Sujatha noticed a lump in her left breast quite out of the blue—a solid mass that wouldn't budge from its place. The gynaecologist at the hospital where she works suspected it to be a fibroadenoma (a non-cancerous lump), but suggested an ultrasound scan of the breast ASAP. The digital mammography revealed another lesion in her right breast that neither Sujatha nor her doctor had felt earlier. They now said both lumps could be malignant. Sujatha had had no family history and had always been fit as a fiddle, so what the Dickens was going on? A core needle biopsy done under the guidance of an ultrasound scan confirmed her worst fear: both lumps were cancerous. While she went through a roller-coaster of emotions, her family and

colleagues at the hospital were in shock: wasn't she too young to have breast cancer?

Counselling's the first step

Suddenly, her life had been taken over by hospital visits, tests, quick decisions on what to do now. Her doc Dr P Raghu Ram, director and consultant oncoplastic breast surgeon at, KIMS-Ushalakshmi Centre for Breast Diseases, Hyderabad, started her off with a solid counselling session.

"Think about planning your baby," he told her—the last thing Sujatha was expecting, actually. "Chemotherapy can throw a young woman into early menopause," he'd explained. He along with the fertility expert at KIMS, explained various fertility-preserving options such as storing (freezing) of her eggs and embryos. Sujatha decided against them after much thought. "I didn't want to take the chance of passing it on to my baby," she explains. She wanted to let a natural conception happen, if it had to, after all this was out of the way.

Knowing is everything

A week after the first battery of tests, she was scheduled for surgery. Raghuram explained the options clearly: "Sujatha was eminently suitable for lumpectomy (breast preservation) on both sides combined with reshaping of her breasts. We had to make sure that the scar in the breast would be almost negligible (oncoplastic breast conserving surgery is the latest surgical tool involving reshaping of the breasts after lumpectomy)," he says. But first he explained the whole process to her through diagrams—what her breast would look like after the surgery, where the scars would appear, where the drains would be placed and such other questions that popped up in her mind.

"I panicked about losing my hair following the chemotherapy, and worried about a reshaped breast and what it would mean for me and my husband," she says. But today, she doesn't feel any different. Sujatha opted for a bilateral lumpectomy (wide excision of the tumour)—this means that her breasts were not removed, just conserved with the remaining tissue. After the surgery, eight cycles of chemotherapy (every three weeks) and radiation followed. But Sujatha decided not to put her life on hold. She continued to be the workhorse she had always been, and focussed on getting a life with her husband. Both seemed to have an amazingly therapeutic effect on her! A few days of rest after each chemotherapy, to let the after-effects wear off, was all she needed. "Working through it all kept me sane," she says.

Being on top of it all

A year has passed since the diagnosis and Sujatha's back on the driver's seat, taking charge of her life, that got derailed for a bit. She doesn't see herself as a patient, but as someone who got lucky after a big scare. She's not taking any chances, though. Sujatha keeps a watch on what she eats and exercises, as she knows piling on kilos could put her at risk again. A low-fat, protein-rich diet and daily pranayam practice does it for her.

Sujatha's family stood by her like a rock through it all. Her mom-in-law, Padma* (name changed) says they took it one day at a time, one step at a time. "We wanted to make sure she kept her chin up throughout. The steel in Sujatha startled us, she was the one who held it together with her courage," she says.

