

CANCERFOCUS



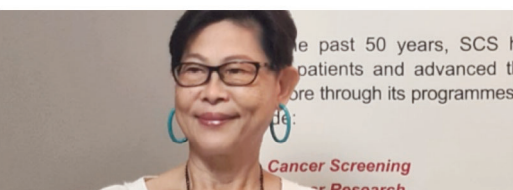
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BREAST CANCER DURING PREGNANCY

Dr Tan Yia Swam

*Clinical Director and Breast Surgeon
Thomson Breast Centre (@ Thomson Medical Centre)*

Breast cancer is the second most common cancer affecting pregnant women, with skin cancer (melanoma) being the most common¹. Research shows that breast cancer is reported in 1 in every 3000 pregnancies, however most do go on to deliver healthy babies².

To find out more about pregnancy-associated breast cancer, we speak to Dr Tan Yia Swam, Clinical Director and Breast Surgeon at Thomson Breast Centre, who sees many women with suspected breast conditions including pregnant mothers.

Dr Tan shares that the symptoms of early breast cancer may include:

- A breast lump
- Unusual thickening/hardening of the breast or skin
- Recent nipple retraction
- Bloody nipple discharge



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Screening for pregnancy-associated breast cancer

Screening tests are conducted on individuals that are generally feeling fine, with no symptoms. Breast cancer screening with a mammogram, is recommended when a woman turn 40 years old. For pregnant mothers who are also typically younger, Dr Tan does not recommend the patient to go for a mammogram to avoid being exposed to X-ray radiation from the imaging test.

The role of ultrasound as screening is not proven. If one has no symptoms, there is no need to do an ultrasound of the breasts. If an ultrasound is done, it frequently picks up many benign lumps which are hormonal in nature and non-cancerous, resulting in unnecessary worry and stress.

Dr Tan also emphasizes strongly on the importance of doing your own screening: "Do your monthly breast self-examination and be familiar with your own body. During pregnancy, hormonal changes may affect your physical body, such as the breast gets larger, lumpier, and the areola or nipple may darken in colour."

If you have any concerns or detect any suspicious symptoms, you should speak to your OBGYN who will be able to refer you to a breast specialist for a more thorough check.



What happens at the specialist?

On your first visit to the breast specialist, your doctor will ask you a few detailed questions to better understand your risk factors for breast cancer.

An ultrasound of the breasts will then be conducted

to check for suspicious lumps. If a suspicious lump is detected, your doctor would recommend you to undergo a biopsy which is a simple procedure to extract a tissue sample from the area of concern to be looked at under the microscope. Core needle biopsies are done with local anaesthesia, and is safe to be done during pregnancy. The laboratory results for the biopsy would then take around 3 to 5 working days to be ready.

What happens if a cancer is diagnosed?

If your biopsy results show that the lump is cancerous, your Doctor will perform staging to diagnose which stage of breast cancer you are at, and discuss with you on what treatment options will be suitable for your pregnancy. To tackle the condition, a multidisciplinary care team will be involved including a medical oncologist who is experienced with caring for pregnant women with breast cancer, working hand in hand with the breast surgeon and your OBGYN to ensure that the patient receives the utmost level of care.



Depending on the sub-type of cancer and the results of the staging scans (such as ultrasound of the liver and chest X-ray), your multidisciplinary care team will recommend a personalized treatment plan suited for your stage of pregnancy. Some patients may be placed on chemotherapy first to treat the cancer, wait for the baby to be near to full-term before going ahead with breast cancer surgery.

Although breast cancer seems to be commonly diagnosed in women, the chance of it being diagnosed in a pregnant woman is only 0.03%! The first step you can take to protect yourself is by doing your regular breast self-examination and speak to your doctor if you notice any new or abnormal changes!

References: 1. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3410508/>. 2. <https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/breast-cancer/living-with/breast-cancer-during-pregnancy>

SCS Reach to Recovery is a breast cancer support group that aims to help women cope with life challenges brought about by breast cancer. For more info call **1800-727-3333** or email **supportgroup@singaporecancersociety.org.sg**.

TIPS FOR SUPPORTING WIFE OR PARTNER UNDERGOING CHEMOTHERAPY

Dr Peter Ang

OncoCare Cancer Centre (Singapore)

The best cancer care involves harnessing the positive energy from the family. Love and care is best demonstrated through actions. Cancer can be a dreaded disease, the human determination and resilience removes the fear. It is not faced alone but with the strength of two, it is easier!

Of the patients who attend our cancer clinic, it is the women who frequently shed tears rather than the man. However, the need for support when told of a cancer diagnosis is needed for everyone. I have written this with the women in mind, but these work for man too!



Hug her

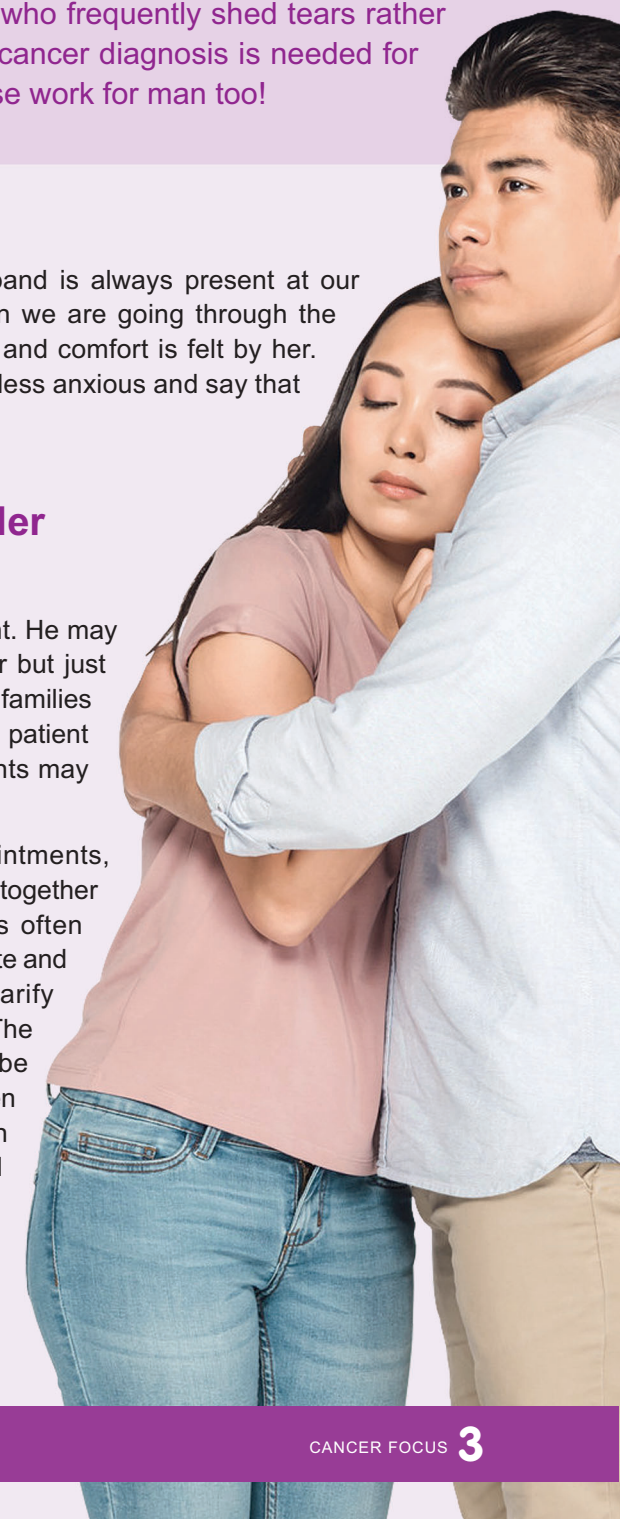
I remember this patient with ovarian cancer whose husband is always present at our discussion and consultations. He would hold her hands tightly when we are going through the results of tests. The gestures are not often noticeable but the touch and comfort is felt by her. Hugs have been reported to reduce stress hormones, make a person less anxious and say that "I am with you in this". The prescribed frequency is daily as needed.



Make Arrangements to Come with Her to the Appointments

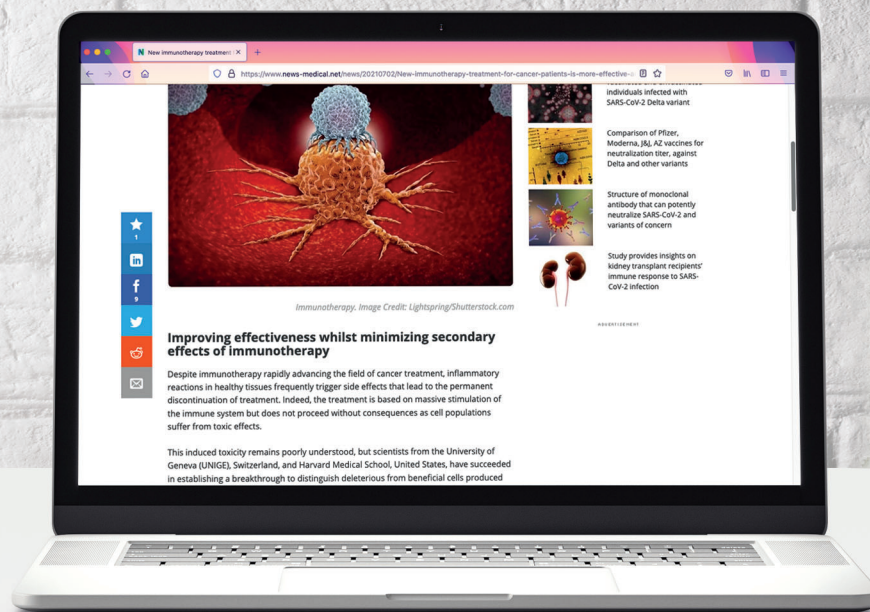
I am always encouraged to see a spouse come with a patient. He may be on his phone outside trying to settle work matters and join in later but just being there shows his support. In modern day Singapore, when many families have both husband and wife who work, it is not taken for granted. The patient can get medical leave but for the spouse, leave to attend appointments may not come easily.

Even if it is for the first few appointments, it helps to have an understanding together about what is going on. There is often quite a bit of information to assimilate and having another listening ear to clarify what was discussed is important. The patient herself might sometimes be emotional and might have forgotten some details of the discussion with her Oncologist Doctor. An additional listening ear being around is good.



3 Learn About the Illness & Treatment

There is a lot of information and misinformation on the internet on cancer. Myths abound and recommendations on what supplements, herb, diet, and lifestyle changes are available a click away. However, there are reputable objective sources of information and there are subjective personal experiences that may not apply to the patient. Differentiating the wheat from the chaff is not easy, and learning involves time and reading.



4 Listen to Her

Husbands are sometimes surprised at what troubles the wife. Some frequently associate the concerns to be related to the chemotherapy. One lady with lymphoma reported that her husband was not helping much as her main concern was her son's PSLE preparation during the period that she is undergoing treatment. She is concerned her fatigue or nausea might affect her tutoring her son and was hoping her husband could help out.

Other concerns might be more intimate. Patients who undergo surgery for cancer may have physical changes and a different body image. Colostomy (an opening or stoma created for stools for colorectal cancer), mastectomy (breast surgery), hysterectomy (removing the womb) and other surgeries can create physical changes in a woman. In addition, hormonal changes related to disease or treatment can also affect intimacy and a patient's sex life. Listening to a spouse's needs is the beginning to supporting that need.



5 Buy Her Flowers

Flowers are lovely. It is often a winning formula when you do not know what else to say or do. Some husbands might shake their heads and say it is an unnecessary expenditure, but it works!



6 Shave Your Head to Support Her

Alopecia or hair loss is common in many chemotherapy regimens. It also happens for radiotherapy to the head. Chemotherapy induced hair loss is important to patients. The type and dose of medication or chemotherapy determines the amount of hair loss. There are chemotherapy drugs that do not cause hair loss, but sometimes it is not the most effective drug to use for that cancer.

Maintaining a healthy body image with good support from family and friends is important. Shaving one's head is asking a lot of some husbands... I had a lung cancer patient's husband remark that since he is balding now, each strand of hair he cuts is even more precious!



8 Check on the Paperwork, Finances

Not being prepared for sudden additional healthcare expenditure is stressful. Not being aware one's medical insurance coverage increases the stress! Several patients had in their youthful days bought extensive medical insurances in Singapore and have not touched the documents since. Some are already well covered but fret about the cost of treatment and are not aware of cancer finance. Many of our patients are not aware that they can claim from Medishield life for private cancer clinics too!

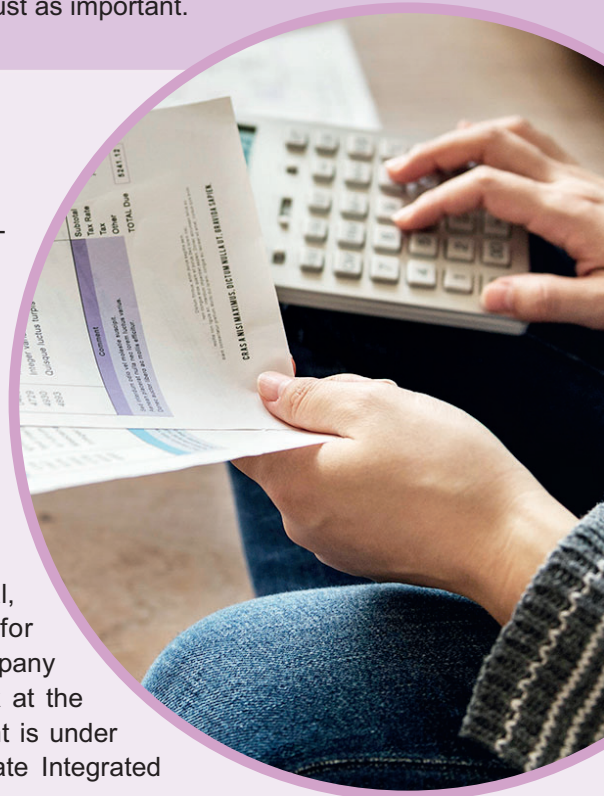
Medical or cancer financing terms such as: co-payment, deductible, Medisave, Medishield Life, Integrated Shield Plans, etc are often alien to patients until they are needed. Integrated Shield Plans for AIA, Prudential, Great Eastern Insurance, NTUC and Aviva cover chemotherapy for Singaporeans, above what Medishield Life covers. Other private or company insurance plans cover for treatment too. Patients also frequently look at the wrong category. For private cancer treatment cost support, the amount is under outpatient chemotherapy treatment in Medishield Life and other private Integrated Shield Plans.

In many Singaporean families, the husband is the one managing the insurance coverage for the wife and children. Digging out the old files and documents to check is needed for peace of mind.

Many companies cover their employees with benefits and these could be checked with the human resource (HR) department. For some patients and families, it may be a time to review wills and do estate planning as well.

7 Prepare the Support Team

Concerned friends and family want to know what is going on. Some patients are more private and do not wish to let others know of their illness or treatment. Someone is needed to be gatekeeper for information about her condition. This person is frequently the spouse of partner. There are well-meaning friends and love ones who would be helping out or offering to pray for her condition as well. The patient herself might be too tired to be regulating or updating on treatment. So a supportive spouse can be a great assistance. The spouse himself is part of the support team too and taking care of his own health, having adequate rest, is just as important.



9 Household Adjustments

There might be a need to take over or manage some of the chores that the spouse had been doing such as fetching the children, doing tuition, applying for leave, settling household bills or arranging meals. In Singapore, most families are small and harnessing the help of friends and relatives to do little bits of work can make things more manageable. Other household adjustments like moving the telephone or TV remote for a spouse who might be bed bound for a while, toilet grab bars, anti-slip mat for the rooms can be easily arranged.

Clinic visits can be long and visits for blood tests, CT scans and other appointments may sometimes require a friend or relative to accompany if a spouse cannot make it.



10 Join in the New Eating Preferences

Taste and smell perception is an important and enjoyable aspect of eating, particularly in Singapore. In that sense, this makes cancer treatment in Singapore so much more difficult for foodies! Side effects of cancer treatments and radiotherapy, as well as cancer itself, can cause altered sensory perceptions in some patients. Some chemotherapy medications used for common cancers like lymphoma, breast, lung and colon cancer affect the taste buds. Other cancers affecting the gastrointestinal tract such as oesophageal cancer, stomach (or gastric) cancer, oral cancers is associated with significant weight loss after surgery or radiotherapy. Easy satiety or feeling full very quickly happens when the stomach is reduced in size following surgery. It can also happen when food tastes bad to the patient or following certain medications and radiotherapy. Being able to understand and plan meals accordingly shows sensitivity to the spouse and encouragement.

In other situations, putting on weight is a real danger! Some patients may require steroids as part of their



treatment. These medications are used for non-Hodgkins lymphoma, myeloma or as premedication for certain chemotherapy drugs such as docetaxel (Taxotere) and paclitaxel.

This increases the appetite and for one patient, it affected her eating habits. She might have craving to eat certain food but at certain times she would refuse when the food is served. Her husband would dutifully finish the food for her!

“Expert knowledge means better care for cancer”

Singapore Cancer Society offers programmes catered specifically for new patients, survivors and their family members to help reduce the stigma, improve communication, and cope with the life-changing consequences of cancer. For more info call **1800-727-3333**.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT FALL PREVENTION

Part of the Cancer Rehabilitation Programme by Singapore Cancer Society

Being a cancer survivor, you may have higher risk of falls compared to normal individuals. The cancer symptoms or the treatment side-effects can affect your body functions that help in preventing falls. Examples include muscle weakness, difficulty in balance and walking resulting from chemotherapy or hormonal therapy treatment.

If you have any of these difficulties, you should be assessed and be guided by a rehabilitation professional to reduce your chance of falls. A thorough evaluation is important because the issue is complex — falls are rarely caused by a single reason; they are often caused by multiple reasons.

To many, falls are associated with a hard landing on the floor resulting in injuries such as a bruise or broken bones. A soft landing on their buttocks is often not considered a fall too many.

Studies have shown that cancer survivors with functional impairments are more prone to falls than persons of similar ages without cancer. It may be useful to check with your doctor to find out if you are at risk of falls based on your medical history and medications that you are taking.



Studies have shown that cancer survivors with functional impairments are more prone to falls than persons of similar age without cancer.



Preventing Falls

- Remove any hazards and reduce clutter as much as possible.
- Rearrange your items and avoid reaching overhead or squatting low to reach for items.
- Increase contrast and improve lighting conditions so that you can see clearly.
- Look out for potential areas for falls.
- Using assistive devices for your mobility.
- Be cautious when you are outdoors.
- It is important to wear covered, well-fitting and comfortable shoes.
- If you are still experiencing muscle weakness or imbalance and your job requires you to do some physical tasks, you may need to speak to your HR representative or supervisor to modify your job tasks.

Established in 1964, Singapore Cancer Society (SCS), a voluntary welfare organisation has positively impacted the lives of those affected by cancer.

It actively promotes cancer awareness in the community and offers cancer screening services [Mammogram, Pap test, Faecal Immunochemical Test (FIT)], welfare assistance, community based cancer rehabilitation, cancer support group activities and hospice care to support cancer patients and families.

OUR VISION

To be Singapore's leading charity in the fight for a cancer-free community.

OUR MISSION

To Minimise Cancer and Maximise Lives through effective programmes.

OUR PROGRAMMES AND SERVICES

1. Financial Assistance

- Cancer Treatment Fund (Cancer treatment subsidies for cancer patients)
- Cancer Care Fund
- Welfare Aid for needy cancer patients

2. Free Cancer Screening

- Pap test and HPV test (For Cervical cancer)
- Health Education: Breast Self-Examination
- Mammogram screening (For Breast cancer; CHAS Card Holders)
- Faecal Immunochemical Test [FIT] (For Colorectal cancer)

3. Public Education

- Cancer awareness campaigns
- Cancer-related talks and forums
- Cancer information (via website & telephone service)

4. Cancer Support

- Cancer support groups and activities
- Psycho-social services

5. Cancer Rehabilitation

- Integrated, person-centred holistic approach with aim to return to normalcy

6. Hospice Care Services

- Medical and psycho-social care for terminally ill cancer patients

7. Cancer Research

- Cancer research grants and awards

8. Volunteers Programme

- Volunteering opportunities to suit people with different interests and skills

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STORY OF A BREAST CANCER SURVIVOR

Mdm Patsy Cheong, 64, was diagnosed with stage 2a breast cancer 11 years ago and is currently in remission. She was encouraged by her elder sister, who had gone through a mammogram, to go for screening.



"In my early 40s to 50s, having a mammogram never crossed my mind because I always felt that I was healthy and there was no need to waste time on screening. Since I was in the high-risk age group my sister convinced me to go for a mammogram," explained Patsy.

After her mammogram she was informed by the polyclinic that there was an abnormality. She was then referred to a hospital for a consultation and biopsy. "My sister followed me when I went for my review of the biopsy. I am glad she did as I was feeling very confused and frightened when I got my diagnosis. I had to go through day surgery to remove the lump. Following that I had 6 rounds of chemotherapy and more than 20 rounds of radiation treatment. Throughout the entire journey my family was with me, supporting me all the way," said Patsy.

The side effect of chemotherapy kicked in after the 4th session and she started feeling lethargic and restless. But that did not stop her from keeping up with her day-to-day activities. As a mother of 4, she managed to juggle her part time job while caring for her children.

Now she advocates early screening and encourages other women to go for mammogram. She said, "My personal experience is that a mammogram is not that painful, and it is a very fast process. Although I am in remission I still go for my mammograms. I think it is helpful and supportive if family members and friends can nudge each other to go for mammograms."

Themed "Buddy Up To Beat Breast Cancer", the national Breast Cancer Awareness Month (BCAM) 2021 Campaign led by Singapore Cancer Society (SCS) aims to encourage women to go for mammogram screening and raise breast cancer awareness with the support of their family and peers by opening up conversations that may help to overcome their fear, anxiety and uncertainty. In the month of October and November, women who are eligible can receive a funding assistance of \$25 from SCS for their mammogram screening. Women who have their mammograms done at HPB's Screen for Life breast screening centres (polyclinic) will expect to pay \$25 (for Singapore Citizens) and \$50 (for Permanent Residents), after prevailing government subsidies and SCS' funding assistance. For mammogram screenings done at participating private breast screening centres, SCS will further defray the screening cost by \$25. To qualify for funding assistance, appointments must be made at participating breast screening centres by 15 November 2021, and the mammogram screening must be done by 30 November 2021. Funding assistance eligibility and a full listing of the clinics can be found at <http://bit.ly/scsbcam2021>.

Scan the QR code using bank app
to donate to Singapore Cancer Society.
All proceeds will be channelled to
support programmes and services
conducted by Singapore Cancer Society.



Singapore Cancer Society produces a monthly e-newsletter 'Society News' with updates on SCS happenings, campaigns, events, beneficiaries and fund-raising initiatives. To subscribe: enquiry@singaporecancersociety.org.sg