

Chapter 1

Tackling Breast Cancer One Step at a Time

In This Chapter

- ▶ Getting through the shock of finding out
- ▶ Understanding your diagnosis
- ▶ Predicting your treatment and outcome
- ▶ Preparing for treatment
- ▶ Moving on to the rest of your life

Breast cancer. Just hearing those words is enough to send a shiver down any woman's spine. Everyone has known at least one friend or family member with the disease, and tragically, so many people have had a loved one who fought bravely, but in the end, lost her battle with the disease. You probably felt deeply for those women and their families, and most likely helped them in one way or another.

But this time, it's different. If you picked up this book, you're likely the one who felt a lump in the shower the other day or had a mammogram that your doctor said looked suspicious and now wants you to have more tests. Or maybe the worst thing you can imagine has happened: Your doctor just told you that you have breast cancer, and you're still in shock. Questions are whirling through your head:

- ✓ How bad is it?
- ✓ Am I going to die?
- ✓ What treatment do I have to go through?
- ✓ Who's going to look after my kids? My job?
- ✓ Does my insurance cover this stuff?
- ✓ How am I going to manage?

10

Part I: Will My Hair Fall Out? Coming to Grips with Breast Cancer

And when you're in shock (which is a completely normal reaction under these circumstances), processing information becomes difficult. You can hear the doctor's words, but they seem to fly right over your head. You just can't seem to grasp what he or she is saying. You heard "breast cancer" and something about "surgery" and "prognosis," and that's where everything stopped.

If you or someone you love has been diagnosed with breast cancer, you've come to the right place. We'll guide you through the process of getting better every step of the way, from diagnosis all the way to the rest of your life.

Staring Right Back at the Shocking News

The impact of the news that you have breast cancer may feel overwhelming at the moment. The key to dealing with this overwhelming news is tackling it one step at a time; taking it piece-by-piece, in little chunks. You may think that you need to act immediately, but that seldom is the case, and your doctor will let you know when it is. Chapter 4 gives you the basics about breast cancer; that's a good place to start getting a grip on what's happening. And check out Chapter 18, which tells you what to expect in terms of emotions and how you can deal with them.

Searching for Treatment

You have time to read about your treatment options and who will serve as members of your treatment team. Chapter 9 talks about treatment options and your team (just call yourself coach). In fact, Part III features chapters that describe the different treatment options, how effective they are, and what their side effects are like. You discover more about which route you may wind up taking: chemotherapy, radiation, or hormone therapy. And what about surgery? Chapter 10 talks about the different surgical options and describes who the candidates are for each of those options.



Take the time to think and feel. Give yourself a week or two to find out about your cancer and what it entails (what kind of cancer it is, what stage it's in, whether it's spread to your lymph nodes or other organs, and so on), consider all your options, and then begin working on your treatment plans.

Predicting Your Prognosis

You need to realize that part of the reason you're suffering from uncontrollable fear and anxiety is that you don't know what you can expect to happen. Understanding your particular diagnosis can help you feel more empowered. Chapter 6 helps you read your pathology report, and Chapter 8 helps you get into the nitty-gritty by answering that nagging question: "What are my chances?"



The three important factors that you need to recognize when talking about your predicted outcome or *prognosis* are that

- ✓ No one, not even your own doctor, can tell you for sure what your *exact* prognosis is.
- ✓ The percentages are just projections, not absolutes. They're based on how large numbers of women in similar circumstances have done in the past. And besides, many other factors can influence your individual prognosis.
- ✓ Prognosis is measured in 5-year, 10-year or 20-year blocks. That doesn't mean that you'll live only 5 (or 10 or 20) years; it's just a way of measuring outcomes. The *survival rate* tells you what percentage of women with breast cancer live *at least* 5 or 10 years after being diagnosed. But remember that many of these women live much, much longer.

The full details about the five stages of breast cancer can be found in Chapter 7. Knowing about the particular stage of your breast cancer points to what your treatment options are and what your prognosis is likely to be.

Talking with Family and Friends

So you're a wreck. What about your partner? And the kids? They know that something's wrong.

Straight talk is the best policy. Be upfront with your partner and other members of your family, talking about your fears. Chapter 19 can help you do just that. Your partner, family, and friends are all so intent on helping you that you wonder just how you're going to be able to help them do that. Sit them down with Chapter 20, which we've written just for them. And what about the kids?

Sharing your journey: Surveying the statistics

More than two million cancer survivors live in the United States. Yes, that means women who have gone through the journey you're about to embark upon and who have not only survived but also thrived. Most of these courageous women have gone on to lead meaningful, productive lives. Some still are struggling to reach the five-year mark, and, of course, some are like you; they've just been diagnosed with the disease. No matter where on their journey they are, a community of survivors stands ready to share its wisdom, supporting you in your times of sadness and celebrating each of your many triumphs.

On the other hand, statistics are startling: Other than cancers of the skin, breast cancer is the most common form of cancer among women. In fact, one of every three cancers diagnosed in women in the United States is breast cancer. The American Cancer Society predicts that in

2003, about 211,300 women (and 1,300 men) will be newly diagnosed with *invasive breast cancer* (or cancer that has the potential to spread outside of the breast). Another 39,000 women will be diagnosed with *noninvasive cancer* (or cancerous cells that lack the ability to spread outside the breast).

If you're like most people, you're wondering, "Will I live?" As many as 39,000 women (and 400 men) died from breast cancer in 2002. It is the second leading cause of cancer deaths among women. But here's some good news: *Most women do not die from breast cancer*, and your journey won't be the same as anyone else's. Your individual prognosis (outcome) depends on many factors, and in Part II of this book, we discuss the probable course of your disease and your recovery. The chances are good that you'll make a full recovery and go on to live a full and fulfilled life, especially if your cancer is detected early.

If you don't tell the kids what's going on, they'll let their imaginations provide them with the answers, and you can bet they'll think of something much worse than anything you could have thought of. But how are you supposed to tell them without scaring them? Fortunately, child psychologists have studied this for many years, and in Chapter 21, we provide you with many helpful insights and suggestions.

Seeking Out Others

After you know where you're headed, you can seek help. Countless support groups and programs are in place across the country to provide you with the help you need, and most of them are staffed by cancer survivors. Don't hesitate about getting in touch with them. We list many of these helpful resources in Chapter 23, and be sure to check out Chapter 20, where we tell you where and how you can build support. Take a look at many of the Survivors' Secrets (they're marked with a special icon) throughout this book for words of inspiration from breast cancer survivors who've been in your shoes and know the ropes.

In addition to person-to-person contact, consider complementary therapies. So many breast cancer survivors have found that yoga, meditation, and breathing exercises have sustained their spirits and strength. That's why in Chapter 14 we describe some of these methods, so you can choose the one that's right for you. After you find the ones that fit your needs, use them and see how wonderful they make you feel.

Taking Care of Business

The final step before beginning your treatment is getting everything in your life in order, so you can focus only on getting better. As tough as that may sound, the reality is that money, insurance, and your job must be addressed even though you may not feel like facing those issues right now. That's why in Chapter 17 we review your insurance benefits, help you plan your financial future, and tell you which laws afford you what kind of protection and where and how to apply for financial support.

Moving Forward with the Rest of Your Life

So you've completed your treatment, and now, you're wondering what happens next. A long, wonderful journey lies ahead, but the two stumbling blocks that you need to watch for are the fear of recurrence and rekindling intimacy with your partner.

Being afraid of a recurrence is natural, but handling that fear wisely is another story. It is possible to predict your likelihood of recurrence, but realizing that *not* all recurrences are the same is just as important. Your prognosis of recovery after a recurrence varies according to the type and extent of the recurrence. All these aspects of your encounter with breast cancer are discussed in Chapter 16, including how to fight a recurrence if you ever do have to face it.

Somewhere between juggling your new outlook post-treatment and stifling your fear of recurrence, you realize that you have a partner and a remaining sense of sexuality! Although you may know it's time to reconnect, intimacy following breast cancer surgery and treatment can be intimidating for many. Don't let that stop the joy that being close with your partner can bring. In Chapter 19, we candidly discuss the stumbling blocks and embarrassing moments, but more important, we explain how to move beyond those roadblocks to experience once again the ecstasy that joining together can bring.

14 **Part I: Will My Hair Fall Out? Coming to Grips with Breast Cancer** _____