



Breast Cancer Survivorship

Long Term Cardiac Risks

Overview

While breast cancer is the most feared disease in women, heart disease is actually the most dangerous. Each year heart disease is responsible for 7 times more deaths than breast cancer. While we do an excellent job at treating breast cancer, in many cases, the therapies can result in significant and often permanent weakening of the heart. This is very important because the presentation of a heart attack is often quite different in females than in males.

Treatment of Breast Cancer

In addition to surgery your treatment may have included chemotherapy, radiation therapy, hormonal therapy and immunotherapy. Each of these, especially when used together or in sequence, may have put you at more risk of heart disease.

Treatment Related Risk Factors

Chemotherapy, particularly with Adriamycin and Cytosine, can result in heart damage. Radiation therapy, especially to the left side of the chest, can increase narrowing of the vessels supplying blood to the heart. Hormonal blockade with Aromatase Inhibitors (Arimidex, Femera, and/or Aromasin) can lead to an elevation of blood pressure and cholesterol, both recognized as risk factors for heart disease. Immunotherapy with Herceptin or Lapatinib can also result in significant weakening of the heart muscles.

Much of the damage may be irreversible and may not be recognized for many years after completion of treatment. As more of the therapies are/were used, the more likely some heart damage may have occurred.

Symptoms of a Heart Attack

Heart attacks typically present with the sudden onset of chest pain radiating to the neck and down the left arm. Women may also experience these initial symptoms, but often the presentation may be much more subtle.

These signs may include:

- Unusual fatigue/weakness with sweating
- Anxiety/ shortness of breath
- Pain/pressure (back/chest – radiating to one or both arms/jaw)
- Irregular heart beat/ ill feeling
- Abdominal pain/indigestion/ nausea & vomiting

As a breast cancer survivor, especially if you have received any, some or all of the therapies described, and experience the symptoms above, please report them to your physician or seek urgent medical attention. We encourage you to be proactive in your healthcare and THRIVE.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult your doctor.