

Spring 2020

## A survivor's voice by Michelle Allen

Survivorship can be full of different stages and challenges. As time goes on, I understand more about my experiences and the process of healing. Adjusting to life after cancer for me, proved to be more challenging than anticipated. After months of chemo, procedures, hospitalizations and surgeries, I was ready for life to go back to normal. So, where is my magic wand that makes everything quickly mend, restore, and make sense?

The next steps after treatment can be less structured and unclear for some of us. Physical healing is visible, more easily assessed, understood, and measured. I understood less why my body tensed as I walked through the front doors at Cancer Care. One day I found myself holding my breath while having a hard time focusing on what was happening around me. As I checked in, I realized I was fighting back tears. I wiped them away, wondering what was wrong with me. I got as far as the treatment room that day, then unable to communicate how I was feeling and embarrassed by my reaction, I walked out of the building without receiving care.

Anxiety looks and feels different for everyone. It can sometimes be described as a feeling of numbness, or of being overwhelmed. Worry about recurrence and stress related to follow-up tests and appointments can affect a survivor's quality of life. My hair grew back, my face became fuller and my skin less pale, but less visible were the emotional scars, the brain fog related to chemo, and the side effects of hormonal therapy.

I connected with a breast cancer support group where I first heard my fears and thoughts echoed back to me. I heard that I was not crazy or ungrateful and most importantly, that I was not always going to feel this way. I acknowledged that cancer had affected my identity; my sense of strength and independence tattered by months of relying on others, physical weakness and loss of control. Slowly I learned ways that helped me begin to heal on the inside as well. Exercise, meditation, and diet changes worked especially well for me. Allowing myself time and understanding created opportunities for healing. A good counselor and a support group created a foundation for motivation and accountability.

Over time, I have learned to recognize triggers that provoke stress and cause me to withdraw or feel overwhelmed. I use ways to be mindful, feel present, and to process events. Most of all, I have learned I am not alone. I continue to grow and learn. While my life today looks immeasurably different than my life before cancer, I have found meaning, relationships, and an impact that is invaluable to myself and my family. Healthcare providers able to recognize and understand post-traumatic stress symptoms related to cancer can open doors for survivors to find helpful resources. Other cancer survivors are there to help normalize fears and help better understand the challenges of survivorship. As we navigate through treatment and beyond, understanding our risks for anxiety and the many things that can help are key to living our best lives and truly thriving after cancer.



Michelle Allen was diagnosed in 2016 with stage II ER+, HER2-breast cancer. Her treatment included AC and Taxol IV chemotherapy, mastectomy with reconstruction and endocrine therapy. Michelle is a certified hospice and palliative care nurse, mother, and active volunteer.

## Clinical Pearl – Immunotherapy in Breast Cancer



Increasingly in my clinic, women and men with breast cancer are asking about immunotherapy due to the recent explosion of interest in this approach across all cancer types. The interest stems from the development of immune checkpoint inhibitors (drugs that unleash the power of a person's own immune system to attack and kill cancer cells) that have revolutionized the management of several previously difficult to treat cancers, including lung and kidney cancer, and melanoma.

Unfortunately, use of these immune-boosting medications has not been very helpful overall in the treatment of breast cancer. In large part, this is because the most common type of breast cancer, Estrogen driven or ER positive breast cancer, does not have the biologic effect of inciting the immune system to act. Recently, however, IMPASSION 130, a clinical trial for metastatic TRIPLE NEGATIVE breast cancer, has shown a clear benefit for adding an immune checkpoint inhibitor to a standard chemotherapy drug, not only prolonging the time to the need for a change in therapy, but also overall survival (living longer but still not a cure). This was most apparent when the cancer had a biologic feature that predicts for the response called PD L1 expression, which is done on the biopsy from the original cancer or from a distant site of tumor. [\(continued on back\)](#)



Kateryna Clark, MA, MS, RD, is on staff at Northern Light Health with a special interest in promoting wellness among cancer survivors

## Food has the power to heal by Kateryna Clark, RDN

Healthy food choices play a critical role in quality of life in people with cancer. It has been scientifically shown that certain nutrients in foods may reduce side effects from cancer treatments, making treatments more effective, and decreasing the risk of cancer recurrence. Types of food preparation is another aspect of healthy eating, since some cooking methods may destroy nutrients and even produce carcinogens. Current research has identified multiple lifestyle factors that may be beneficial, specifically for patients with breast cancer or those at-risk for the disease.

Much information on the internet is confusing, often contradictory, and inaccurate. That is why we would like to invite everyone dealing with breast cancer and survivors to come to a nutrition session to learn the latest scientific updates and recommendations about breast cancer nutrition, discuss different approaches to weight loss, particular foods and nutrients that may decrease or increase risk for cancer, and perhaps share your own views on diet and nutrition. Get all your questions answered by a licensed expert in metabolism and food science – your registered dietitian nutritionist.

Currently we are developing plans to launch a virtual learning opportunity focused on how you can improve your health and well-being through nutrition. As soon as we work out the logistics, we'll post the details at [northernlighthealth.org/cancer](http://northernlighthealth.org/cancer). Please stay tuned for more information about the online gathering.

### Continued - Clinical Pearl: Immunotherapy in Breast Cancer

The clinical trial result led to FDA approval of atezolizumab (immune checkpoint inhibitor) in combination with a taxane (standard chemotherapy agent) for patients with newly identified metastatic triple negative breast cancer as a first line therapy.

There is currently **no** proven benefit for immunotherapy in earlier stage triple negative breast cancer or any other subtype. Research is ongoing and it is likely that with this successful trial in metastatic triple negative breast cancer, there will be clinical trials coming soon to address other breast cancer subtypes/situations.

## Is the **FABREC** study right for me?

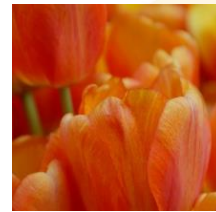
Study of Radiation Fraction on Patient Outcomes After Breast REConstruction

- Step 1**
  - You had a **mastectomy** followed by **immediate reconstructive surgery**
  - You are eligible for **radiation therapy**
- Step 2**
  - You and your doctor talked about **FABREC** and you want to participate
- Step 3**
  - You are randomly assigned to a treatment group (either Group 1 or Group 2)
- Step 4**
  - You complete a brief baseline questionnaire, submit baseline photographs, and begin your assigned treatment
- Step 5**
  - We will follow-up with you at 6, 12, and 18 months after the start of your radiation treatment for:
    - Follow up questionnaires
    - Photographs of your surgery site

### Resource Corner

#### Breast Prosthetics and Apparel Shop

Our shop is located at Northern Light Eastern Maine Medical Center's State Street campus at Breast and Osteoporosis Care. Our service is designed to meet the needs of any woman looking for a specialized fit. The shop offers a large variety of surgical and non-surgical bras, bathing suits, breast prosthesis, as well as camisoles, sports bras, and more. Fittings are done in a private room in a sensitive, professional manner by Lou Ann, our Certified Breast Garment and Prosthetic fitter. Our fitting service is provided at no charge by appointment from Monday to Thursday. Please call 207.973.8500. Many insurances cover surgical bras and breast prosthetics. For those in need with breast cancer, thanks to a grant from Tradewinds, help with coverage may be available.



#### FAMILIES MATTER

In these challenging times, we thought we'd offer a few reliable references to help children and families cope with additional stress. As always, if it would be helpful to talk, call us.

#### National Childhood Traumatic Stress Network

##### Information:

[www.nctsn.org/resources/parent-caregiver-guide-to-helping-families-cope-with-the-coronavirus-disease-2019](http://www.nctsn.org/resources/parent-caregiver-guide-to-helping-families-cope-with-the-coronavirus-disease-2019)

**Activities:** [www.nctsn.org/resources/simple-activities-children-and-adolescents](http://www.nctsn.org/resources/simple-activities-children-and-adolescents)

Find out about how you can participate in **Champion the Cure Challenge 2020**. Visit [www.ctchallenge.org](http://www.ctchallenge.org).

### Northern Light Cancer Care

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207.973.7486 | [northernlighthealth.org/cancer](http://northernlighthealth.org/cancer)