

Underestimated Late Effects of Breast Cancer

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Women who have been successfully treated for breast cancer are still not in good health for many years. In a study on more than 300 affected women, epidemiologists of the German Cancer Research Center (Deutsches Krebsforschungszentrum, DKFZ) have demonstrated the real causes of a reduced quality of life of breast cancer patients one year after diagnosis. Fatigue is the main problem affecting the well-being of breast cancer survivors.

What factors have an impact on life after breast cancer treatment? A group of epidemiologists headed by Dr. Volker Arndt of the Division of Clinical Epidemiology and Aging Research approached this question from two different angles: Under the leadership of Professor Hermann Brenner, the researchers studied objective factors such as age and school education of patients as well as subjective symptoms such as pain and exhaustion. They demonstrated that only three objective factors determine the well-being of affected women. These include the patient's age, the tumor stage at the time of diagnosis and whether the patient suffered from other diseases. Surprisingly, the type of surgery – whether breast conserving or breast removal – had an impact only on selected aspects of quality of life. The primary advantage of breast conserving surgery appeared to be that patients had a better body image after treatment.

“Tumor stage and age of a patient cannot be changed by a doctor,” says Arndt. “But physical symptoms such as fatigue can be treated by a doctor.” The medical researcher is convinced that fatigue is key to the

well-being of those affected. The term “fatigue” is derived from the French word for “tiredness, weakness, exhaustion”. In English there is no single word that describes all the various aspects of this condition. “Patients feel extraordinarily exhausted, weary and depressed during cancer treatment and for several months after,” the epidemiologist learned in talks with affected women. The vague definition of fatigue makes it difficult to find out what causes it. The exhaustion may be caused by the tumor itself or an adjuvant chemotherapy. Scientists know that there are many causes of fatigue which often become effective at the same time.

Although fatigue is one of the most common symptoms affecting breast cancer survivors, doctors and patients often know very little about it. “Studies about the effects of cancer such as fatigue are still in their infancy and there are hardly any treatment possibilities yet,” explains Volker Arndt. In order to effectively treat the long-term effects, people need to become more aware about them. For that to happen, we need to elucidate their causes and find effective treatment approaches. With the number of cancer survivors increasing, there will be a growing demand for such treatment.

Source: Deutsches Krebsforschungszentrum

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