

The Southampton Press

May 14, 2020

CANCER JOURNEYS

A Twice-a-month column from
Fighting Chance

Cancer Patients & COVID-19



Diagnosis

Emotional Impact

Treatment/Side Effects

Survivorship

Patient Stories

Q. Does cancer degrade our immune system?

A. Yes. One way is by thwarting the production of white blood cells. They are robust infection-fighters so diminishing them leaves us immune-compromised, thus making cancer patients more vulnerable to contracting COVID-19 and having a more difficult time battling it.

Q. If someone has cancer and they are treated with chemotherapy, does that make their immune system even more degraded?

A. Yes. Because chemo is a killer of white blood cells (while it is also killing cancer cells.)

Q. Does “maintenance therapy”- the long-term use of chemo to suppress the return of cancer -- also degrade the immune system?

A. Yes. Maintenance chemo is quite prevalent but because it begins after the initial cancer was placed into remission, a patient may not appreciate that their immune system continues to weaken.

Q. If it has been over two years since a patient's cancer was placed into remission, and they've had no other treatments, has their immune system recovered?

A. Yes. But if the patient has been in remission for only a couple of months their immune system has not had sufficient time to build back up to a normal level.

Q. About how many adults on the East End are likely to be diagnosed with cancer during their lifetime?

A. About 40% of men and women will get cancer during their lifetime.

Q. If someone with cancer is getting chemotherapy, is it likely that they might skip a treatment to avoid going to a hospital where the risk of COVID-19 infection may be present?

A. Yes. During March and April 2020, compared to the same two months in 2019, patients were a “no show” in the case of about 30% of scheduled chemo sessions.

Q. What if a patient in treatment needs to go into a hospital for tests to monitor the effectiveness of their therapy-- like blood tests or C/T scans. Were there more “no shows” for this in 2020 as compared to 2019?

A. Yes. This sort of hospital-based testing, as compared to a year ago, is down in many regions by as much as 75%.

Q. Is there any evidence that cancer patients on the East End are experiencing greater stress and anxiety levels because of the COVID-19 pandemic?

A. Yes. Fighting Chance counselors-- all licensed mental health professionals like LCSWs -- specialize in providing stress relief to cancer patients. We have seen an uptick in counseling requests beginning in mid-March and many of the calls are from people worried about the COVID-19 risk in one way or another.

*Fighting Chance has offices in
Sag Harbor and at the
Phillips Family Cancer Center
in Southampton.*

*For more details, or information
please call 631 725 4646.*

*Visit our website at
www.fightingchance.org*

The author of this column, Duncan Darrow, is the Founder and Chairman of Fighting Chance, a free-of-charge Cancer Counseling & ResourceCenter serving the East End for 18 years.

The author gratefully acknowledges the weekly newsletter, www.cancernet.org, published by the American Society of Clinical Oncology.