

# when cancer strikes

It's even more complicated when it's a mom with young children

For 31-year-old mother of three Susan Goff, a routine monthly self-exam when she was just 28 changed her life. After discovering a lump, Susan, who lives in Slidell, saw her Ob/Gyn, who told her it was probably nothing to worry about given her young age and lack of family history of the disease. Still, her doctor had Susan undergo a needle aspiration, which came back inconclusive, meaning that the test results could not give a definite answer as to whether the lump was cancerous.

Susan then went to see a surgeon, who, like her Ob/Gyn, was not overly concerned about her chances of having cancer; however, he still advised her to have the lump removed. Shortly after the procedure, as she rested in her bed at Touro Hospital, Susan learned the lump was malignant.

"I cried for like five minutes, and then I was like, 'okay, I have to do what I have to do,'" she says. Susan learned that her breast cancer was stage two. To battle it, she underwent four surgeries in addition to chemotherapy and radiation.

Throughout her treatments, Susan maintained her full-time job while raising her then-two- and three-year-old step-children, whom live with her and her husband. It was exhausting,

**All children need the same basic information —the name of the cancer, the part of the body where the cancer is, how it will be treated and how their lives will be affected.**

physically and emotionally, but she remained focused.

"There were times where I felt like I couldn't do the treatment anymore," Susan says, "but not once did it cross my mind that I would not make it." She says that the support of her husband and her mother helped her stay optimistic. She also credits her young step-children with helping her stay strong by keeping her busy and her mind off her illness.

There were times when the physical toll of Susan's treatments



cutline: zjhg cjZxc Zgcz  
czhgjhz cjhgzxch zjc zh c

was too much. When all she could do was lie in bed, her husband took over, taking the kids to and from daycare, bathing and feeding them, and putting them to bed. They tackled her disease, and its treatment, together as a family.

## effects on children

While 95 percent of breast cancer patients are over 40 years old, the American Cancer Society (ACS) states that 10,000 women under 40 are diagnosed with it each year. Many of those women are mothers to young children. It's not surprising some choose not to tell their children about their illness for fear of upsetting them. In an article on the ACS website, Terri Ades, RN, MS, director of the ACS's health content nursing staff, explains, "It's natural for parents to want to protect children from harm. That's what parenting is all about."

Yet even if children aren't told about the diagnosis, they quickly become aware of changes at home, and can be confused by them. A 2006 *British Medical Journal* (BMJ) article titled "Breast Cancer in the Family—Children's Perceptions of Their Mother's Cancer and Its Initial Treatment" details how even the youngest children were aware of their mother's cancer diagnosis as well as the seriousness of the illness. Some

aspects of their mother's treatment were especially stressful to children—specifically seeing her immediately postoperatively, seeing her after chemotherapy treatments, and observing her hair loss. The BMJ study states that parents sometimes underestimate the emotional impact of the disease on their children.

The ACS advises that parents tell their children what's going on, while taking into consideration the child's age.

“Young children need very simple information using words they understand,” says Ades, “while adolescent daughters of women with breast cancer will have very different concerns. All children, however, need the same basic information—the name of the cancer, the part of the body where the cancer is, how it will be treated and how their lives will be affected.”

### *effects on the patient*

While a cancer diagnosis is traumatic at any age, young women with breast cancer face a different set of hurdles. The Young Survival Coalition, an international organization dedicated specifically to young women with breast cancer, states on its website that unlike their post-menopausal counterparts, young women diagnosed with breast cancer face higher mortality rates, fertility issues and the possibility of early menopause.

“There are many obstacles these young women must overcome,” says Robert B. Gardner, Ph.D., director of psychosocial oncology at Touro and a member of the hospital’s three-person cancer counseling team which works with patients from initial diagnosis through treatment and recovery. The first hurdle the patients face, according to Dr. Gardner, is “the fear that they will not survive the disease.”

Additionally, following a mastectomy, patients may feel like they have lost their femininity and sexuality; these thoughts can also cause patients to become uncomfortable in intimate situations.

“Appearance and body image are really important issues when helping women cope with breast cancer,” says Dr.

Gardner.

A great concern for young women who haven’t finished—or even started—having children is the very real chance that their cancer treatment might cause infertility.

Susan hit a low point with her disease during a meeting with her doctor to discuss her treatment options. The oncologist told her that chemotherapy and radiation treatments were her best chances of survival, but that they would cause her to become infertile.

“The doctor’s exact words were, ‘if you were planning on having children, you can forget about it,’” says Susan. Though it upset her greatly, she chose the treatment plan to have the best chance for survival. She finished her treatment in October 2007. The following June, she discovered she was two months pregnant. Though thrilled about the news, she was also worried about the complications that could arise. If her cancer returned during her pregnancy, she would not be able to receive treatment. She also worried that because she conceived so soon after her treatment ended, the toxins would still be in her body and hurt her unborn child.

To Susan’s immense joy and relief, she delivered a healthy baby girl this past spring. Today, Susan remains cancer-free: a survivor, a wife, and a very grateful mom.

---

*Krystral Cooper Christen is New Orleans-based freelance writer and the mother of four-year-old Ramsey and one-year-old Kolbie. This is her first article for nola baby & family.*