Woman's Hour Breast Cancer Awareness – what you told us about …

Screening and Diagnosis …

Fiona – fine needle aspiration
I believe all women should be offered the procedure known as fine needle aspiration as a matter of course. A tissue analysis offers a much greater chance of accurate diagnosis, early intervention and ultimately survival.

Sue – keep living
When I had breast cancer, I saw on the doctor's notes that I was a 'terminal patient' although I was never told this. I felt that the doctors were preparing me for death but I realised that I'm not dead yet and I'm fitter than before—even with chemo.

Susan – get screened
I was diagnosed in my early 40s after having had benign breast lumps for two years. I strongly recommend that anyone with breast lumps below the age of regular screening has their lumps checked by a specialist annually even if they have to pay for it themselves.

Jane – have a massage
My husband found the lump whilst giving me a massage with aromatherapy oil! It probably saved my life…

Sarah – go for screenings
I want to encourage people to go for their routine mammograms so that they get an early diagnosis; a majority of people on the nurse's list don't turn up for their appointments. When I was screened, only seven of thirty people showed up! People don't go because they are afraid. I went for my mammogram for peace of mind. Just get the treatment over with and don't wait!

Treatment Choice and information …

Jane – on prosthesis, tamoxifen side affects and being strong
I am 67 and it is now over 24 yrs since I had my mastectomy. I did not really want a reconstruction and found that N.H.S prosthesis are excellent! I am quite happy as I am and have just had a clear mammogram result again. The only problem I had was that I was on Tamoxifen for 9 yrs. This left my vagina in poor state needing frequent Oestreol cream applications. Intercourse can be quite painful. I also have developed a degree of lymphoedema requiring daily exercises and visits to the lymphoedema clinic. I feel the reason that the mastectomy did not really bother me was that 3yrs previously to breast cancer I had been diagnosed with manic depression (bipolar). …My manic depression is now stable, two of my children are married, I have three granddaughters and a new baby is on the way. I do not feel any bitterness at what life has thrown at me, but I think that these setbacks in life help to make one stronger.

Yvonne – men need more awareness
Thankfully I have not suffered from breast cancer but my husband did. He had a small lump and had a mastectomy. I would like more awareness of breast cancer in men.

Anon – know you have choices
When I was diagnosed with primary breast cancer at the age of 32, the doctor looked at his shoes as though he was giving me a death sentence, and told me I was likely to be left infertile by a barrage of essential treatment. I wish I had known when he gave me that terrifying diagnosis that I did have a choice: the benefits of combined chemotherapy, radiotherapy and five years of tamoxifen offered me only a fraction of 1% increase in my chance of surviving ten years.

Elizabeth – the mental aspect of breast cancer is now taken seriously
In August 1991 a week after my tests I attended the ward at North Staffordshire Infirmary as told to. I arrived at 9am and sat in the ward until 3pm when a young trainee Doctor came and told me the news that I had breast cancer and it seemed to have spread to my lymph nodes. … As you can imagine I could not speak. As we left the ward the registrar turned to me and said 'Now you know the score go and get

some sun' I have often thought of the replies I could have given him but as I felt I had just been given a death sentence I was numb and just walked out past him. I had no counselling during the 6 months I had therapy. After the operation and experimental chemotherapy I had a complete break down. Luckily for me I had a wonderful family to support and love me and here I am 16 years on with grandchildren and a lovely life. Things have improved in clinical practice and at the mental aspect of breast cancer is now taken seriously. I often think of that registrar and hope that he eventually gained wisdom and treated women like me with less contempt and I hope none of his loved ones ever experience what he did to me.

Linda – take time to think though the alternatives

I was diagnosed with breast cancer two years ago. Before I knew what the consequences were I was given a biopsy without being told of the risks involved. Later, when told I was to have a mastectomy, I asked for more time to sort out what I wanted to do about my cancer, rather than sign the agreement form for surgery within two weeks. … I had to have great presence of mind to insist I be given more time to find out what alternatives there were for me. I wish I had known to say 'no' before the biopsy, because my tumour grew after that and I had no choice but to have the mastectomy. My point is that the breast cancer system I entered into was like a factory of well intentioned people who all conformed to the accepted way of doing things and had great resistance to anyone who suggested there might be another way. I was able to stand up for what I wanted and keep on good terms with everyone in the NHS system. There has got to be more tolerance of alternative treatments.

Anon – be aware of side-effects

I was diagnosed in 1996. No one analysed the tumour so I don't know any oestrogen status. Also, I didn't realise how bad the side-effects of tamoxifen were. My GP just asked if I had private insurance -the trust were out of money so I had to pay for treatment. She has never discussed it since. I gave up taking tamoxifen - the main reason was side effects and I was fed up with the receptionist saying did I need my repeat prescription. The final straw was being told to remember the surgery's drug budget, considering how cheap Tamoxifen is....

Rachel – know what symptoms of secondaries are

I was diagnosed with primary breast cancer just over 10 years ago, and like the washing machines that go wrong just after the guarantee runs out, just as I am counted as a 'successful survivor' in the stats now I learn that I have secondries (liver and bones). I would have liked more information earlier on as to how to recognise the onset of secondaries, and what treatments are (and are not!) available at this stage.

Francesca – the wide range of treatments available

My experience of having breast cancer is that it is a bit like the run up to childbirth. In the same way that no-one thinks to tell you when you're pregnant that you may end up with parts of your insides so stretched that you feel you could comfortably park a Harrier jet, with breast cancer you suddenly find out about all sorts of disturbing procedures, treatments and side effects that you had never ever heard of. Previously I thought having breast cancer was a simple affair – diagnosis would be followed by a mastectomy, chemotherapy and radiotherapy. Wrong! Everyone is an individual with a different treatment plan. I personally didn't have a mastectomy, but had a "central wide local excision", followed by a "sentinel node biopsy", which was then followed by full removal of the lymph nodes. Following this operation I then had to visit the "Seroma" clinic to have fluid removed for 2 weeks and my children's (now aged 25 and 23) towelling nappies came into their own again, as a useful mop up for the leakages. The last bit of treatment was radiotherapy. It was all such a horrible surprise and you enter a different world with breast cancer.

Alice – make sure you see an oncologist

After my first mastectomy with reconstruction in 2000 I only saw a junior surgeon for annual follow-ups. The trend had started for encouraging women to `feel more in control` in decisions about their treatment, and I was influenced by the Jane Plant book "Your Life in Your Hands"… I decided to stop my Tamoxifen partly under a misapprehension that it could `bring on` the menopause - it can only produce symptoms similar to that. I expected to be challenged by the Dr. at my check up and would then presumably had my misunderstanding corrected; but as I was not even asked whether I was still taking them or how I was doing on them, I concluded it wasn't an important element of my treatment.

I had a second, new, tumour diagnosed 4 yrs later resulting in a second mastectomy with reconstruction. The Tamoxifen would have given me a 50% better chance of not developing further cancer, and apart from living with knowledge that I might have been able to avoid that, I worry that this could happen with other women if it common practice for them to only be seen by surgeons and not see an oncologist until they are more seriously ill: if this is policy in most hospitals it seems to me to have an element of stable door and bolting horses! I take responsibility for my decision but feel I was not given clear enough information…..

Carol – get information about side-effects
When I was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2001 I would have liked to have had more information on the type of side effects which are experienced due to the treatments … Going through an enforced overnight menopause was a great shock for body and mind and I have gained over 2 stones in weight since having chemo and Tamoxifen. I have found Maggie's Centre in Edinburgh a great support and source of help and advice for people and their families affected by cancer.

Jo - take time between diagnosis and surgery
I was diagnosed in 1999 and had a lumpectomy followed by radiotherapy and I am very well. However, I wish I had had more time between my diagnosis and my surgery to think through what I wanted. My excellent surgeon made her recommendation and I went along with it as I was still shocked. Knowing what I know now I would have liked to have had a double mastectomy, which would have eliminated the need for radiotherapy (I had bad side effects and still suffer from some of them), eliminated the need for mammograms, or any recurrence in either breast, and I would not have had to wear any form of prosthesis unless I wanted to.

Catherine – conception after chemo
In Aug 2005 I was diagnosed with breast cancer at the age of 33, I was fortunate enough to only require a lumpectomy and didn't have to face the emotional trauma of a mastectomy; although my lymph nodes were already infected and I underwent an aggressive round of chemotherapy followed by radiotherapy. At the time of my diagnosis my husband and I were trying for children, and along with the worry of my condition was this …. I desperately tried to find information on other women who like me who had had a breast cancer diagnosis and then had children afterwards, but without success. For anyone out there in a similar position, I would just like to say that now, 2 years later, my husband and I have a beautiful 6 month old baby girl, conceived naturally. I don't know what the future holds but when I look at her it is enough to live just for now, and make every precious minute count both for her and the rest of my family.

On Relationships …

Stephanie - get help from friends
On the day of chemo it's all very chatty but it's when you get home that it hits for a few days. So it was wonderful to have friends come to keep me company, help me cook little tasty meals. I had another friend who was working but phoned me every Saturday. Every chemo day she left a little parcel on my doorstep. And during the radio therapy she sent me an advent calendar so I had a chocolate treat every day. Another friend gave me a cornucopia of little parcels that I could unwrap on days I felt low.

Liz - love is the key
The hardest part was telling my husband and family, particularly my mother who had already lost her son in a road accident at the age of 16…. My children, then aged 26 and 23 were so strong and supportive and my wonderful husband literally "loved me" back to health but it was so hard seeing them suffer. I think back to that time with mixed feelings - it was obviously terrifying but it also made me feel so loved and cherished by my family and friends.

Carol – explain everything to children
My mother had breast cancer in the 1960s, when she was 40 and she had a lumpectomy in a London Hospital, no further treatment was available. I was about 12 and remember being confused but she was a

conscientious mother who explained anything I wanted to know. Now I appreciate how difficult it must have been for her to talk to her children and I am very grateful that it was not a mystery.

Anon – talk before the operation
My mother … had a mastectomy with the glands under her arm removed. From that time onwards she was unable to allow my father to see her new body and so the sexual part of their relationship ceased. … During the later years, when my mother was very weak and terminally ill, it became more obvious to us just how cruel my father had become towards her. He refused to hear anything about her illness, pain, feelings, hospital appointments or anything about what she was going through … I wonder if, as part of the initial pre-op Consultation, a Nurse could talk immediately to people like my parents about their feelings, before shutdown occurs.

Emma – help through prayer
I was diagnosed with breast cancer at 29. I believe in Jesus and this got me through and the prayers of my friends. I'm Now 34 and fully healthy with a baby daughter.

Suzy – find and make use of available support
I am a specialist oncologist dietician who has recently had the full surgery, chemo and radiotherapy treatment for breast cancer. This is a tremendously challenging treatment regime and getting as much support as possible is the key. My employers (being NHS & Hospice) were fantastic as was Breast Cancer Care. The support is available & I encourage people to find it and make maximum use of it. Doing it alone makes it an impossible struggle.

Stephanie – positive attitude and belief in life
Just 7 months ago, my beloved mother was diagnosed with invasive breast cancer. … Throughout the last seven months, my mother has kept working because she 'felt normal and like everyone else' and she kept up her strength, morale and spirit whilst being incredibly brave. I will not let her cancer haunt me and instead wake up each day and think how proud I am of her. We treated this cancer like a weed that just needed extra-strong weed-killer. In life, we have many mountains to climb, some smaller, some higher, but when we reach the top – life is very much worth living.

Jeanne – make "bosom pals"
I was diagnosed with beast cancer a year ago and had a mastectomy followed by chemotherapy. I was lucky enough to make friends with four other women in hospital at the same time and we have met regularly ever since. This has been the greatest help as we all experienced times of depression, worry and strange symptoms which we could talk about and help each other through. … The fact that during my treatment I hardly ever saw the same person twice, so far three consultants, two oncologists, six breast care nurses and seven chemotherapy nurses, has not helped… I am now healthy and hope to have reconstruction next year, but I still get a great deal of support from my "bosom pals". I would advise anyone facing breast cancer to try to find others with the same problem. It really helped me through.

Vivien – do your own research
I was diagnosed in February 2002 following a routine mammogram with DCiS (Ductal Carcinoma in situ) and had a lumpectomy in the April and radiotherapy in the July/August - I also had a further op in May 2002 to remove some lymph nodes as the cancer had begun to invade the breast tissue. … I did my own research into DCiS and went to see the surgeon already armed with a number of questions - which were fully answered. My husband was very supportive and was prepared to ask the 'awkward' questions if I did not. … It was difficult telling our family - two sons in England and friends - all of whom were very very supportive. In some ways I feel as if my husband had the more difficult time - who did he turn to for support? I have now completed my 5 years and am not on any medication - my life has continued its normal routing and I feel I am blessed in my family and friends.

David – be as informed as you can
Myself and my brother lost our mother to breast cancer on 6th October this year. Unlike most sufferers, the end came very suddenly… The day before death her sense of touch had become agonisingly painful. A neighbour has since told us that the latter is a typical symptom when the end is near (his wife died of

breast cancer). Strangely enough, no NHS medic briefed us over what to expect even though she was having daily health visitors during the last few weeks, and my brother was acting as her carer. I wasn't present at the time of death; better informed and I would've been.

Amanda – become a campaigner and fundraiser
Although I haven't had breast cancer myself, my youngest child, Rebecca, died of the disease at the age of 33, only 11 months after she was first diagnosed. To try and live with her loss, I've become a campaigner and fundraiser for Breakthrough Breast Cancer and, through my involvement with this amazing charity and the memory of my darling Becs continues to be celebrated, to the benefit of future generations.

Kath – share your feelings with your children
I had breast cancer 12 years ago and my biggest regret was not sharing it with my daughter. She was only 10 at the time, and we had lost a friend to breast cancer the year before, which upset her. I thought if I told her I had it she would assume I was going to die. So I kept it to myself. In some ways it helped me as I had to pretend things were normal. The sad thing is that years later she told me she knew I had it - she had seen a letter someone had written to me. I felt so sorry that I hadn't shared it with her and that she had to cope with the knowledge on her own.

Scouce_Amazon - How to tell your young kids
Explaining my hair falling out was easy - she pulled it out and accepted her baldy Mum with no qualms. Explaining the mastectomy was another matter. I'm a size 20 and hugs and cuddles are very important to us. My little girl loves stories, so I wrote her a little book with simple pictures to explain how I would lose the boob. She added her own words and her opinions on the pictures and I reworked it into a little A5 pamphlet that we read whenever she showed any signs of insecurity. I included things she already knew about and then continued with how I imagined everything else would be - radiotherapy, getting strong again, reconstruction (maybe) and then picking up life where we left off. My MacMillan nurse borrowed the pamphlet for other mums with little ones and apparently it was a big help. My little girl certainly found it useful and had no worries about Mummy being poorly at all.

Andrew – widowers need help and support, especially if parents
If the disease spreads and kills as it did in my wife's case, it is the man that has to hold all this together. Not only is he the confidante and lover, but has to sustain the morale of his wife or partner while dealing the practicalities situation, the children, and sadly, … often … the prospect of death. Rightly, the focus must be on the women who have to fight the disease, which is the basis of the "industry" which is now breast cancer awareness, but quietly and possibly ignored are the men out there who have to deal with the full impact of the disease both during and after the battle, whether it is lost or won.

Natalie – look for treasures
Even though it is a hard road, there are treasures - owed to Gods' love, and the generosity of friends and family.

Susanne – reassure others
I had breast cancer two times with 23 years in between during that time I had to reassure people around me that I could talk about it.

Sue – ask for help right away
I had breast cancer 12 years ago and kept it to myself to protect my elderly parents and friends because I found it very difficult to ask for help. I only did so when I was admitted to the hospital. Now my daughter's friend is doing the same and I want to tell people to ask for help from those around you right away!

Eileen – be kind to yourself
14 years since my diagnosis, there is life after it. I've had a lumpectomy and five lymph glands removed as well as my right breast. I was 58, when diagnosed. Now, I have a wonderfully busy life and it's all clear. Be kind to yourself and get rid of people around you who are irritating!

Clare - a supportive family

I recovered at home with my young children in a supportive family and the very positive treatment was as good as I could have hoped for, especially after going through a marriage break up earlier in the year - this was just a blip!

Caroline – get someone to field people
I found people's reactions to either ignore you or overwhelm you. My husband fielded people and reduced the number to a few key people involved during this time. Being angry kept me going thought it can be destructive. To avoid unpleasant situations when you're out and about, take someone with you and do what's right for you.

Hilary – see it through with a friend and play some Bach!
I was told that my ovaries would have to be zapped, which was devastating because I had no kids. I met another woman in the same position—lumpectomy—and we were diagnosed together. We have become soul mates; we call each other 'The tit twins'! On my second operation, Bach was played, which really helped…

Philip – good relationships are vital
It's very strange as a man because symptoms and such are targeted towards women. And it's very difficult to talk to anyone. Good relationships are vital as after treatment, they throw you back into society and you're on your own again. ..

Edwina – don't take life too seriously
I'm proud of my scar and show everyone. And I love my new shape - flat! Women are amazing. The black humour amongst us - we are friends for life through this. You can't take life too seriously.

On Reconstruction …

Tess – feel feminine
Before my mastectomy, and since it, I have always felt wonderfully feminine, I have a very beautiful small breast that sits opposite a beautiful scar, no reconstruction, and I choose not to wear a prosthesis, `You are not an outside - image you are an inside vision`

Christine – be informed about possible problems beforehand
I was diagnosed with breast cancer in July 2006 and was given options and decided for the above reconstruction. At no time was I ever informed of the problems I might have from this reconstruction. After suffering with a frozen shoulder, physio every week and exercises at home on a daily basis and now acupuncture it is still not back to full use. I must confess if I had known the problems I would have not had it done. I am told by several people who have had their stomach muscle used that they have not had much of a problem.

Nancy – size can be an issue
The problem with prosthesis is that they're too heavy especially for larger women. I think now I would prefer to have both breasts off - then I could choose what size you'd like!

Paddy – it's never too late!
I had a mastectomy in 1972 and didn't have a reconstruction for 20 years. It was fantastic and ended years of looking for bras that could fit prosthesis into.

Denise – self-help helps
I set up a group for ladies going through reconstruction. About 15 ladies attend every month – it's going from strength to strength.

Alice – be aware of possible side effects
I had implants fitted when I was 18 and had them removed when I was 32. The dangers of implants made me very ill with symptoms similar to cancer. I never told my friends.

Nick – question the medics at every stage
I am writing as the husband of a woman whose case has been so atrociously handled at virtually every stage … that she now has two legal actions in progress…. …My wife has a reconstruction that is

completely the wrong shape … she is in permanent pain from a combination of nerve damage and scar tissue. We have learnt subsequently that this is a not infrequent side-effect and the sleeping pills and anaesthetic patches that she has to use every day make hardly any difference to the chronic pain. …You ask in your trailer what we have learnt know that we wished we had known earlier. Principally this is to question medics at EVERY stage and I would never recommend an latissimus dorsi flap reconstruction to anyone.

Alyson – reconstruction made me feel better about myself
I was diagnosed with breast cancer in March 2004. Initially I had a lumpectomy followed by a mastectomy a week later… earlier this year (2007) … I went for an appointment with plastic surgeon specialising in reconstructions and was recommended the die flap reconstruction method (I got a tummy tuck at the same time!) I decided to go for it although it was a big operation and feel much better about myself!

I have thoroughly enjoyed walking into shops this summer and buying pretty tops and swimming costumes and showing off my cleavage. I feel much more balanced and am delighted with the result. I feel as though I am more normal again and am starting to believe I will live.

Anne – get back into the real world
In 2002, I asked my consultant to remove my right breast and reconstruct both sides. Unfortunately, it did not work. ….. I spent the next few months hiding away from my family, and friends. I wouldn't go out, and if I did I avoided people I knew. My GP eventually put me in touch with the local mental health clinic where I was given every opportunity to get back into the real world…… I joined a temping agency, who were extremely sympathetic, and who settled me in part time work, gradually introducing me back to my previous working life.

Hints and tips and getting through …

Ann – accept who you are
I didn't know that life could end much sooner than expected and plans for the future could prove futile, or that when the surgeon had broken the bad news, they give you tea. But, I learnt to accept what I am, without the destructive habit of unjustified self criticism; that life is a finite gift, to be enjoyed in full…

Jane – have a laugh about it
My way of dealing with crises is via humour! Oh my God, stick-on nipples?! Do they have them in different colours?

Gill – try writing poetry
Counselling was an absolute disaster for me until I found the right person who offered me creative writing sessions with a poet. I had no experience, but I wrote my heart out, quite literally—things came out that I didn't know I was feeling. I won't win any prizes, but it really helped my ability to express myself.

Teresa – keep busy
My best advice is to keep focused and busy. I was too busy to fit cancer in…

Sandy – get honest information
I've had three primary breast tumours and two mastectomies and have been living with secondary cancer of my bone and lymph for the past six years. What helps me most is being given honest information, the opportunity to make choices, and to have my choices respected. My GP has been a tower of strength throughout and I cannot praise him enough.

Linda – treat yourself
The first thing I did when diagnosed, was buy a pair of gold leather loafers to keep me on my feet and cheerful.

Lorraine- have a sense of humour

I was pregnant when having a mastectomy then able to breast feed before I had to have chemo. I was more worried about losing my hair through the pregnancy than the chemo so I welcomed the change in look. My husband nicknamed me 'Slitheen' and we laughed a lot. Radiotherapy meant I've now got three discrete tattoos and my falsie is great!

Jill – write down your feelings
I felt a lump in my right breast only to find that it was cancer and it was on its way into my lymph nodes. I was admitted two days later to have a mastectomy and sixteen nodes were removed. Big shock. I made notes all the time of my feelings and thoughts; which I am putting in the book I am writing about my life. I made it through with a positive attitude. My fiancé and I managed to laugh through the chemo and radiotherapy. Hair loss, the wig and false eyelashes - not having a drink of alcohol. Putting my makeup on everyday and saying who shall I be today, because I didn't recognize myself. It kept us upbeat.

Nicky - it's not the end
Breast cancer is not a death sentence—the road is long and intense to get through but once you see the light at the end of the tunnel you can start running again. I have had the support of family and colleagues and friends. My motto in life has always been 'We are here for a good time, not a long time.'

Norma – embrace it
It would be a rocky road and there will be many tears but you will come out a much stronger and nicer person from the journey. Try to embrace the situation that none of us would choose to be in, hating it will add to your stress level.

Deborah – look at the rest of your life
Although I was told it was nothing to do with me, I found that my immune system was not functioning and the tumour was as a result of cells not dying off and hanging on in there. So, I wondered what was I hanging on to and not letting go of and I explored my emotional responses to situations that had been painful for me. I have been able to let go of resentments and hurt and pain that I had been feeling, which has been incredibly liberating. I don't blame cancer. I have found it a powerful experience for reorienting my life.

Sue – try Reiki
I started Reiki healing which together with conventional medicine treatment has kept me healthy and strong to this day. My diagnosis changed my life for the better in the end, and I left my stressful jobs as a director of student support in higher education and now teach and practice Reiki healing.

Sally – try aromatherapy
I am not that 'Pollyannish' about cancer and positive experience. As a direct result of my own diagnosis and treatment, I found aromatherapy and now practice it professionally. My advice is: find something that works for you and go for it!

Anne – live for today
I have had breast cancer twice. My way of coping has been to live for the moment, in 'the power of now.' Dwelling in the past or thinking about what might happen in the future won't change anything. This moment in time is the most important.

Sarah – get a specialist
If you are concerned about your health in any way, my advice is not to wait for numerous general doctors' appointments, but you must insist on seeing a specialist. Don't wait or be persuaded to wait.

Sue – talk about it
Research has shown that the more women talk about their diagnosis, the better their survival. So face the fear and tell anyone who is willing to listen!

Susan – try a cold cap to keep your hair

This Thursday marks the end of my chemotherapy, six treatments over 18 week. I came through virtually unscathed despite all the possible side effects plus I have kept most of my hair thanks to the cold cap. To me my hair was important as it made me feel less of a victim. I live on my own and have lots of dark moments but as long as I can still ride through the countryside with my lovely dog and joke with my grandchildren, I know life is still good despite that big C peering over my shoulder…

Hilary – keep fit

At 58, I was diagnosed in April 2005 having just completed Hawaii Ironman Triathlon. I thought my life was at an end. However I cycled the daily 58 mile round trip for radio therapy and after that forced myself to complete an off road marathon in 5 ½ hrs in October. I achieved a world triathlon age group gold this year.

Janice – get a tattoo!

Five years after reconstruction, I plucked up the courage to make a statement—body art! Last week I had an amazing tattoo to cover the long scar and central disaster area across my left breast.

Jane – ask questions

My first impression of the diagnosis was breast off, end of story. But to have choices, that really threw me. I went through my A4 sheets of question (with patients stacking up behind me) and my consultant answered them in detail, carefully and reassuringly; even my first one: 'Are you qualified to do this operation?'.

Joanne – don't overload

Remain positive, don't get overwhelmed with information—a little at a time—and try to keep a sense of humour.

Sarah – look after your money

My tip to listeners is to make sure they have mortgage protection and critical illness cover. You never know what is ahead of you. My support has been fantastic – beyond all expectation. But I wish I had been wiser about the money!

Yvonne – it's not too bad

My fear was not of the breast cancer itself, but of the treatment I'd have to face if diagnosed. Chemotherapy isn't as terrible and frightening as you might imagine. I've certainly shed many tears of distress over the past few months, but it hasn't devastated my life and I certainly haven't been throwing up for days on end. Everyone's experience is different, of course but I've yet to meet a fellow patient who's come anywhere near the popular portrayal of the frail cancer patient who spends long hours hunched over a sick bowl.

Tara – work less and get out more

To get through chemo and radiotherapy, I worked reduced hours and started exercising lightly—both of which helped tremendously. Work helped normalise things and exercise mitigated the effects of the chemo. I'm not naturally sporty but I was able to complete a 5km Cancer Research Race in a respectable 44 minutes of speed walking.

Hilary – Seven handy tips

Rule 1. Treat yourself to a decent wig/hat/headscarf.
Rule 2. If you're going to keep your hair, get some pretty underwear!
Rule 3. Eat what you fancy.
Rule 4. Rest when weary.
Rule 5. Exercise when you feel like it.
Rule 6. On your good days, give yourself treats.
Rule 7. Try to find a chemo buddy.

Denise – try holistic healing

How I coped was to find out all I could about a holistic approach to healing. I needed to find out what might have caused the cancer and then fight back with self help. I obtained valuable information from canceractive.com and found the autobiography, ‘Your life in your hands,’ to be a big support. My aim was a complete life appraisal. Positive thinking is not enough - there is a need to reappraise lifestyle, check diet, exercise, make time for yourself. Allow time to heal and enjoy life to the full…

Judy – don’t wash your hair
A practical tip for anyone with dry and grotty hair post-chemo and messed-up hormones: Use less shampoo! Only about once a week or less. And no conditioning products—let your hair’s natural oil do their stuff.

Eunice – keep going
The first thing my nurse said to was, ‘Let me tell you something, there is life after cancer.’ Of course I didn’t believe her, but here I am, ten years on. I have seen all three of my children marry, and will soon greet the arrival of our fifth grandchild.

Imaginative_river – try ‘cancer coupons’
During treatment I started 'cancer coupons' deals. With a 'cancer coupon' I was given permission for say, not finishing a project.... or for say ... wanting extra support ... or for say ... taking a day to watch the sun move. … When I couldn't eat certain foods, I used a coupon to request no one eats that food around me. My daughter used them for changing her final school project to "A day in the life of breast cancer." My husband used them for staying home an extra day to enjoy some things together instead of only looking after me on my most dreadful days.

Thank you everyone for your contributions. More of your comments are still available at http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/mbradio4/F8324324