

Recovery and acceptance: Your body: I have breast cancer

I have breast cancer!

Dear fellow sufferer, You have heard, just like we, that you have breast cancer. In the Netherlands dozens of women and a hundred men yearly, receive this diagnosis. You will have to deal with it, whether you want to or not.

How you do that, is up to you; you know best. You know yourself well and you know what you need. It comes as a huge shock and all sorts of thoughts race through your mind. How am I going to cope with this in relation to my children, my partner and my family?

Yet you must learn the art of putting yourself first, because you have to be economical with your energy and focus on yourself.

Try to talk with those you live with, or with close friends, if you live alone. They will listen to you. As for you, by telling it to others, your story will gradually become real to you.

Above all, they might want to help you for a time and take over some of your chores. You need time to be ill, to receive treatment, and make regular visits to the hospital, to recuperate, to rest, to relax and to exercise.

Of course, whatever you can and want to do, you just do. That is perfectly fine, as long as it doesn't tire you out. So don't exhaust yourself and take your rest on time.

Depending on the severity of your illness and your treatment, your recovery will take 1 year or longer. You need this time to come to accept your new self, to get to know your capabilities and to pick up your life in a responsible manner.

Check-ups after the first treatments After the first treatments, often surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy, you will receive regular check-ups. At first they will be often. Later they will become fewer and eventually they will take place yearly.

These check-ups are done by the surgeon, the internist, or the radiotherapist assisted by the cancer nurse practitioner, or another specialised nurse, depending on the hospital.

Always take someone with you, certainly if you don't understand and speak Dutch sufficiently. Two hear more than one and afterwards you can discuss together what you heard.

It is important that all the messages, tips and instructions you receive are clear to you. Try to summarize what you have heard and ask questions straightaway. If you are unclear about something, say so immediately.

At the check-up, the doctor will check if the recovery is progressing properly. The wound has to be healing,

the arm on the operated side should be starting to move easily again and the radiated spot will be inspected. Sometimes it will be necessary to take an X-ray or perform an examination first. These you have to plan in shortly before a check-up.

The doctor looks to see if the cancer is entirely gone and staying away. Relapses (new tumours) or metastasises (spreading) do sometimes occur. Metastasises can occur in the liver, the lungs, the bones or in the head. If this happens, a new treatment trajectory is necessary.

Most often, this happens within 5 years, but it can happen later. This is bad news, although it is very possible to stay alive for years on good medication.