

## RETURNING TO NORMAL AFTER BREAST CANCER

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Long term data has shown efficacy of lumpectomy and radiation for women with breast cancer. While equal in effectiveness to mastectomy, the implications for the vast majority of women are that life after breast cancer is much more normal.

That means if the cancer is localized, removal of the lump of cancer (lumpectomy) followed by radiation therapy is equal in medical results but by far superior in cosmetic results.

An interesting study recently published by Higgins and Haffty from Yale University School of Medicine looked at the results of pregnancy and lactation (milk production) after lumpectomy/radiation treatment of breast cancer.

In the recent article, the researchers described their evaluation of women who after breast cancer treatment had lactation or milk production in the involved breast. The authors attempted to analyze features which might interfere with this function.

Evaluated were 890 patients treated in the Radiation Department at Yale University with Stage 1 or 2 breast carcinoma. These stages included women with early localized cancer. The records of these early stage patients were reviewed to identify patients who became pregnant after treatment of breast cancer with lumpectomy and radiation. Thirteen patients were identified and of these, eleven were interviewed.

The researchers noted that the women had "little or no swelling in the treated breast during pregnancy. After delivery, lactation from the treated breast was present in four instances, absent in six and pharmacologically (drug) suppressed in three." The latter category means medication was administered to inhibit milk production.

An incision around the nipple area was associated with an absence of lactation in three women. The group felt that successful milk production is less likely to occur in those women who have cancers that arise from the central portion of the breast about the nipple.

The study is interesting because a significant proportion - approximately one-quarter - of women have breast cancer before menopause, with a share of these women having a pregnancy after the diagnosis of breast cancer.

The age range of women evaluated was 20 to 41 years. All eleven women who were interviewed remained free of disease.

The authors noted that "two patients experienced unplanned pregnancies during external beam radiation. One patient had a second pregnancy following that and she delivered a healthy child sixty months after completing radiation" and one patient had a "positive pregnancy test twelve weeks after completing radiation therapy." It was noted that her pregnancy was uncomplicated and she delivered a normal baby nine months later.

The authors stressed the importance of avoiding pregnancy during radiation in order to minimize exposure of the growing fetus to any radiation. For this reason, women of child-bearing age are urged by radiation oncologist not to become pregnant during or in the interval after exposure to radiation of any type.

Of those eleven women interviewed, the thirteen pregnancies that occurred after radiation therapy did so without any abnormalities of the babies.

The authors concluded that "this study provides evidence that some patients may experience lactation from the treated breast after breast-conserving treatment for early stage breast cancer. However, it is likely that the volume and duration of lactation from the treated breast would be less than that of the untreated breast."

Thus, it remains hopeful that not only can women with early cancers be cured but that the breast can remain intact and in certain cases, lactation function remains.