

8 THINGS ABOUT breast cancer *every woman should know*

Actress Olivia Newton-John, 63, was diagnosed with breast cancer when she was 44. Nearly 20 cancer-free years later, she tells us what the experience taught her and the advice she'd give women battling it today

Interview **Evie Leatham**

1 Trust your gut instinct

"Women get lumps and bumps and our breasts go up and down; often it's nothing, but if it is malignant, the earlier you find out, the better. In 1992, I discovered a lump during a routine self-examination, which a mammogram then confirmed as negative. I'd had lumps before, but this felt different; it was very tender (though that's often not the case), and I had no energy. I had a feeling that something wasn't right, so I went back to my doctor. Luckily, he was sympathetic and suggested a needle biopsy, which was also negative, but he followed it up with a surgical biopsy to be certain, and that revealed I had cancer. It's uncommon for both a mammogram and needle biopsy to show a false negative, so I don't say it to worry women but simply to stress how important it is to trust your instincts – I'm relieved I did. I had a partial mastectomy and breast reconstruction within weeks.

The surgery was a shock for my body but I knew it was getting rid of the cancer. I had a six-year-old daughter to worry about and just wanted to be healthy again."

2 Go somewhere you can't be heard and scream

"Cancer doesn't just affect our bodies – it affects our emotions, too. It's incredibly important to release all the pent-up pain, anger and fear that you're bound to be feeling, whether you do it by going for a run around the block or by screaming loudly in the shower. I found counselling invaluable in helping me get breast cancer off my chest – there's an unhappy pun! I also used visualisation techniques, where I'd imagine my dog running through my body, eating up the cancerous cells. Cancer taught me to put myself first sometimes. Like most women, it's in my psyche to take care of everyone else, but even now, I still take time for myself during the day, even if it's just going for a short walk."

3 Get someone else to tell everyone

"When the second friend I called with news of my diagnosis burst into tears, I asked my sister and a friend to make the rest of the calls so I could focus on being positive. It's hard enough coping with your own fear without having to deal with other people's, too. My best friend Nancy's husband is a Buddhist and his first reaction was, 'Well, congratulations – now you will grow.' At the time I thought it was a bizarre statement but, looking back, I understand what he meant. My experience has inspired me to spend the past ten years raising money to set up the Olivia Newton-John Cancer & Wellness Centre in Melbourne, which is opening in July."





6 Alternative therapies help

"I've never liked putting chemicals in my body, so chemo was a shock that I tried to counteract with holistic therapies and by supporting my immune system. A host of things worked for me; I had massage, homeopathy and acupuncture, and did meditation, where I focused on healing myself. I learnt a lot from Deepak Chopra, who gave me some meditative mantras (try *The Ultimate Happiness Prescription* by Deepak Chopra, Rider, £7.99). I believe an integrative approach to treatment can help overcome cancer."

7 You won't forget you had cancer, but you won't always remember

"I don't dwell on it. Once a year I have a mammogram and ultrasound and I'd like to try the newer digital breast-imaging screens. I do a monthly exam with a Liv Self-Exam Kit that's available in America (visit liv.com; amazon.com). It helps you feel any lumps more easily."

8 Cancer treatment has changed in my lifetime, and it will in yours, too

"Twenty years ago, breast cancer was still the scary 'Big C' and women tended to keep their diagnosis secret. It no longer has the stigma it used to, and women I meet don't think of it as a death sentence. The cure rates are constantly improving, as are the treatments. Through my work, I visit lots of cancer hospitals and there's real hope that there will come a time when people don't have to be treated with chemo. The best thing I can say is, 'It's been 20 years and I'm still here!'" ●

4 Talk to a survivor

"A colleague put me in touch with a woman who had been through the same treatment. I was able to ask her what it was *really* like; she'd been there and got through it, which I found invaluable and it just helped talking to someone who really understood my fears."

for me, that was more frightening than surgery. Luckily, it wasn't as bad as I'd feared. After my first treatment, my friend took me to the movies to take my mind off it and gave me a juice with ginger to stop the nausea. Drugs are much better now and I tell women imagination and fear are usually worse than the reality."

5 Chemo is boring – take a friend along

"I had eight months of treatment but I was lucky – I lost my eyebrows and eyelashes, but not my hair. It knocks the stuffing out of you, but it's not permanent. Chemotherapy was an unknown; I had no idea how my body would react and,

Eat for life Olivia Newton-John's cook book *Livwise* (Murdoch, £17.99) is a collection of healthy recipes, from almond pancakes to watermelon gazpacho, to raise money for the Cancer & Wellness Centre. "I've always eaten pretty healthily – my mum made sure of that – but when I was diagnosed with breast cancer, I couldn't get enough vegetables and I went on a macrobiotic diet," she says. "Switching to a healthy diet doesn't have to be boring. When I serve up these recipes at home, friends are amazed at how good they taste." For more information on the Olivia Newton-John Cancer & Wellness Centre, visit oliviaappeal.com