Caring for your heart during and after breast cancer treatment

For patients and families

Reading this booklet can help you learn:

✔ How some breast cancer treatments may affect the heart
✔ The signs of heart problems
✔ What tests are used to check your heart
✔ What you can do to help your heart
✔ Where to get more information
Some breast cancer treatments that are vital for your health, may affect your heart.

To care for your heart, your Oncologist (cancer doctor) has asked a Cardiologist (heart doctor) to be part of your health care team.

As part of the Ted Rogers Program in Cardiotoxicity Prevention Clinic, the Cardiologist will check how well your heart is working and treat your heart at the earliest sign of a problem. The goal is to keep your heart as healthy as possible during and after cancer treatment.

Your heart health is an important part of your care.

How could breast cancer treatment affect my heart?

All treatments have the possibility of side effects (unwanted effects). Some breast cancer treatments have side effects that affect the heart.

The most common side effects are:

- **Heart dysfunction** – this means the heart is not working properly. You may hear this called heart failure.
- **Chest pain**
- **Irregular heartbeat**

Together these effects are called **cardiotoxicity**.

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<th>Cardio</th>
<th>Involving the heart</th>
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<td>Toxicity</td>
<td>The degree to which something is toxic or harmful</td>
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What is heart dysfunction?
Heart dysfunction means your heart is not pumping blood around your body properly. Your body may not be getting the blood and oxygen it needs.

This does not mean your heart is about to stop working. Your heart just needs some help to do its job.

Heart dysfunction can occur during cancer treatment or any time up to 2 years after your treatment is finished.

What are the symptoms of heart dysfunction?
When your heart cannot pump properly, blood doesn’t move out of your heart very well. It may back up into your lungs, abdomen (belly) and legs.

If this happens, you may have:
- Difficulty keeping up your usual level of activity
- A bloated feeling around your abdomen
- Feeling less hungry that usual
- Swelling in your ankles and feet
- Feeling lightheaded or dizzy when you change positions, when you are active, or both
- Shortness of breath, at rest or when you are active

Talk to your oncologist or cardiologist if you have any of the symptoms above.

- Shortness of breath when lying flat
- Waking during the night because you feel you need to sit up to breathe

Some symptoms may seem like those related to your cancer or cancer treatment.

But, if you notice these 2 symptoms, let your heart team know right away.
**Which cancer treatments may affect my heart?**

Breast cancer treatment is designed to meet the needs of each person.

Your care plan may include one or more treatments, such as:

- surgery
- chemotherapy
- radiation
- targeted therapy
- hormone therapy

Some treatments that are very effective against cancer carry a small risk of side effects that could affect your heart. This is why caring for your heart is an important part of your breast cancer treatment plan.

**Chemotherapy**

Some types of chemotherapy can affect your heart. However, the chance of getting heart dysfunction from chemotherapy is very low. About 3 to 5 people out of a group of 100 people will get heart dysfunction from chemotherapy.

People who are more likely to get heart dysfunction from chemotherapy:

- are over age 65
- have been treated for cancer before
- have known heart problems, diabetes or high blood pressure

**If heart dysfunction is found and treated early, it usually gets better.**
Radiation

Radiation, especially if given to the left side of your chest, can affect the heart and its blood vessels (arteries). This may happen during treatment or a long time (up to 10 years) after your treatment is over.

Some of the possible effects of radiation are:

- heart dysfunction
- heart valve problems
- chest pain
- heart attacks

But, the chance of your heart being injured from radiation is very low. Your radiation doctors will make every effort to prevent this from happening to you.

What can be done to prevent heart problems from my cancer treatment?

Your Oncologist and Cardiologist will work together to help protect your heart. Any signs of heart problems will be found and treated as early as possible.

Your Cardiologist and the heart team will check your heart during your cancer treatment. You will have tests that provide valuable information about your heart.

Your heart tests may be repeated during, between and after your cancer treatments.
The heart team will compare your results to see if there are any changes in your heart.

After cancer treatment, you will have follow-up visits with your Cardiologist and the heart team. This is important to make sure your heart stays healthy.

**What tests will be used to check my heart?**

**Troponin**

- This blood test measures certain proteins in the blood that are released when heart muscle is damaged.
- If results are higher than normal, there has been some damage to your heart.

**Brain Naturetic Peptide (BNP)**

- This blood test measures the amount of the BNP in your blood. BNP is made by your heart and shows how well your heart is working.
- If results are higher than normal, it may be an early sign of heart dysfunction.

**Echocardiogram**

- This is an ultrasound of your heart. It will show if your heart is pumping normally.
- Using this test and new research, your health care team can spot heart problems even before the development of heart dysfunction.

**Electrocardiogram (ECG)**

- This test records the electrical activity of your heart. It can detect problems related to your heart rate and rhythm.
Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI)

- MRI uses a magnetic field and radiowaves to make detailed pictures of your heart. No x-rays (radiation) are used, so it is very safe.
- This test can show the pumping action of your heart. It is the most accurate way to measure how well the heart is working.
- MRI can also show details such as inflammation, swelling and scars which cannot be shown well in other tests.

Cardiopulmonary stress test

- This is an electrocardiogram or ECG done while you are riding a stationary bicycle.
- This may be done at the end of your chemotherapy treatment to measure the effect of exercise on your heart and better understand your symptoms.

Surveys

- At times your health care team may ask you to fill out confidential surveys.
- Your answers and comments will help them better understand your symptoms, your overall health and health care needs.

What can I do to keep my heart healthy?

It is important to take part in your care and keep your heart healthy:

- Watch for symptoms of heart problems (see the list on page 3). Tell your Cardiologist if you develop symptoms, so they can act quickly.
- Visit your Cardiologist and the heart team at the clinic and have your heart tests as scheduled, so that any heart problems can be found early.
- Follow the tips on the next page for healthy living.
Healthy living for your heart!

**Be active**  Try to stay active during your cancer treatment.

- Aim for some exercise or physical activity each day.
  Even 10 minutes of activity has health benefits.

  Increasing physical activity after treatment can help:
  - strengthen your muscles (including your heart)
  - improve your fitness level
  - lower your blood pressure
  - give you more energy

**Always follow your health care provider’s advice about your activity.**

**Eat well**  Healthy eating is one of the best ways to keep your heart healthy:

- Eat a variety of foods from the 4 food groups each day.
- Read food labels to choose healthier foods.
- For a heart-healthy diet, limit food and drinks that are high in calories, fat, sugar and sodium (salt).
- Drink little or no alcohol.
- For more information about healthy eating go to: www.healthycanadians.gc.ca and click on “Food and nutrition”, then “Healthy eating”. 
Healthy living for your heart!

Do not smoke

If you smoke and need help to stop, lots of support is available:

• Call the hospital Pharmacy at 416-340-Q-U-I-T (4075) about programs to help you quit
• Talk to your family doctor
• Ask your public health unit about support groups in your community
• Get help online at www.smokershelpline.ca

Where is the clinic located?

Ted Rogers Program in Cardiotoxicity Prevention
University Health Network, Toronto General Hospital
585 University Avenue
5NU Cardiac Ambulatory Clinics
Phone: 416 340 5309
Toronto, ON  M5G 2N2

My care instructions

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