



**W**hen doctors told Irene Chui 10 years ago that she had stage IIB breast cancer, her biggest fear was — what if I die?

Her children were then aged nine and 11, and she was just 36 years old. “Death comes into the picture, which is quite natural when you’re hit with the ‘Big C’”, says Irene, a human resource practitioner.

She underwent almost three years of treatment, which included a mastectomy of her right breast and its reconstruction, chemotherapy and radiation. Doctors also induced her menopause to stop the cancer cells from spreading.

These measures proved effective in battling the physical symptoms of the disease, but Irene had to contend with the other aspects of her condition. She had to adjust and orient herself to the new look of her body, and regain confidence in her appearance.

Determined to live life to the fullest, Irene worked out regularly and immersed herself in sports, such as captaining a dragon boat team of fellow survivors. By doing so, she built a “happy, strong mind” that infused positive potential into a depressing situation. But there was one challenge still to be tackled — getting

# Making a clean breast of it

Talk it out — a diagnosis of breast cancer needn't mean the end of bedroom intimacy. By Desiree Koh



things back to normal in the bedroom.

"You can't just jump back into it," says Irene, who volunteers as a counsellor at the Breast Cancer Foundation where she is involved in the organisation's awareness, education and fitness programmes.

In her experience, until the treatment and its side effects are over, it's hard to think about details such as the physical part of marital relations. "You won't have the urge, and it takes a while to build up the confidence, feel normal, and deal with the physical pain," she reveals.

But surviving is not the end of the story. Undergoing a mastectomy — the partial or complete surgical removal of one or both breasts — means losing a defining feature of

welfare organisation dedicated to nurturing a healthy perspective towards family life.

A surgical scar takes some time to heal, and medical complications can arise as a result of treatment. Sexual response, too, can get affected, because a breast cancer patient may feel physical pain in the treatment area, as well as other parts of the body — including the genitals — as a result of both the mastectomy and breast reconstruction.

If radiotherapy is involved, there may be tenderness in the treatment area. The area may also become extremely sensitive to touch. How long these lingering effects take to dissipate varies between individuals.

"This can be upsetting as a woman then cannot be as physically close to her husband

mastectomy and manage their expectations by looking at pictures of pre- and post-surgery breasts. Then, they need to deal with the change in appearance — the next step is to stop thinking of the woman as a "patient" but rather, embrace the fact that she is a wife.

#### LET WORDS FLOW

Ironically, the easiest solution can be found in a single word: talk. "It's important for a couple to establish good communication and talk about what they are and aren't comfortable with when it comes to sex," explains Dr. Chew. "A woman may be waiting for her husband to make the first move. In turn, he may be afraid of hurting her." But keep mum, and it could be even more damaging not just to the marriage but to the wife's overall recovery, he adds.

As Irene says: "Be open with your husband and deal with these issues before your relationship sours. Don't think it is not a problem, because it is. You've already lost your breast — don't lose your sex life."

A reconstructed breast can take up to two years to re-size and naturalise, and Zoladex, a cycle of hormonal injections which induces menopause to prevent the cancer from returning, needs to be taken. Both would affect how a woman looks and feels, as well as change the way she would enjoy sex.

Talking openly about sex can be difficult for Singaporean women, but getting the communication going is crucial. After all, it is no different from a marriage having lost its spark and a couple having to work to rekindle the romance of their courtship days, says Irene. "It's like having a new lease on life, physically, mentally and emotionally. Once you've taken the first step and your husband isn't scared to know your new body, you can get back to a fulfilling sex life," she says. ●

*To seek help regarding fertility and family life issues, contact aLife at 6258 8816. aLife is an organisation committed to educating, advising and supporting women and their families on issues related to reproductive health. [www.alife.org.sg](http://www.alife.org.sg)*

## "Deal with the issues before your relationship sours. Don't think it's not a problem because it is. You've already lost a breast — don't lose your sex life." Irene

femininity and one of the body's erogenous zones. That can make re-establishing intimacy with one's spouse difficult.

According to University of California, Berkeley researchers, breast cancer survivors can face sexual difficulties up to five years after the end of treatment. Also, the US National Cancer Institute reports that half the women who have undergone breast cancer treatment experience sexual dysfunction.

Although Irene has been in remission for more than seven years, she made the tough decision of removing her reconstructed right breast last year as her oncologist detected the possibility of the cancer returning.

In all that time, Irene and her husband, who until recently was a project manager, have always made the search for answers together. He had complete trust in the strength of their relationship and offered all the support she needed. This, Irene says, was the key to her regaining her confidence.

as before," says Dr. Chew, who specialises in sexual dysfunction. "Painkillers or a change in sexual positions to those that put less pressure directly on the chest can help."

He also recommends vaginal moisturisers and alternatives to penetration such as foreplay for women who experience pain or discomfort. Easing back slowly into actual sex can open up new avenues of pleasure that might not have been explored before, he says.

Sometimes though, the pain goes deeper — a breast cancer patient may feel anxious about intimacy or experience emotions that suppress sexual desire. "A patient may feel very disconnected from her body after breast surgery," says Dr. Chew. "She may have low self-esteem and think that her husband will no longer find her attractive and desirable." Survivors too, often feel guilt that they can no longer completely fulfill their role as a wife.

For this, Dr Chew says both husband and wife need to understand the aftermath of

#### COPING WITH PAIN

Breast cancer has a survival rate of more than 75 per cent with early detection. But in leading support group sessions, Irene has met survivors who have never successfully revived their sex life, to the extent of seeing their marriages end in divorce.

"It is an eye-opener. A lot of husbands desert or divorce these women during the illness, even if there are children," she says. And the men who do so come from all age, educational level and income groups.

Marriages break up because there are many factors at play — physical, emotional and psychological, explains gynaecologist Dr Peter Chew, who is also the founder and chairman of aLife, a non-profit voluntary

## IT TAKES TWO The husband's crucial role

Gynaecologist and sexual dysfunction expert Dr Peter Chew shares how husbands can help with recovery through intimacy.

Be ready to move back from being a caregiver to a lover

Encourage your wife to take an active role and show

you where her erogenous zones are

Understand that vaginal sex might be painful and be creative in other pleasurable ways of connecting such as massages, or caresses in a romantic setting

Offer as much intimacy as she is comfortable receiving

Be sensitive to her physical fatigue and emotional stress, which can mean placing her needs above your own

Make time for yourself and address any anxiety you might feel, with regards to both your own sexual needs and from supporting her through treatment