

# A Survival Guide to Chemo and Radiation

Category: Stories

written by Lynn Lazos | October 19, 2018

**Lynn Lazos ~**

Chemotherapy and radiation are not pleasant experiences, but knowing how to handle them can make your life a whole lot easier.

I had my first mammogram at age thirty-five, and for the next thirty-five years I had mammograms regularly. On my way, I'd pass the entrance to the Thomas Johns Cancer Hospital, outside of Richmond, VA, never thinking that I'd one day cross that threshold myself.

When I heard the "C" word, I didn't know what to do. I wanted to run far, far away. After much grief, however, I realized that this was just another challenge in life. I'm a retired small-business specialist/contracting officer who wrote contracts for the Army. My thought was, *If I can brief four-star generals, I can get through this.*

After having the cancer surgically removed, I was told that my stage-one tumor was a high grade three, meaning my cancer was highly aggressive. The time for chemo and radiation had arrived.

My oncologist gave me the following list:

1. You are going to be tired.
2. You are going to lose your hair in seven to ten days.
3. You are going to be nauseated.
4. If you get a fever over 105°, call the doctor.
5. Try to stay full.
6. Try to stay hydrated.
7. You will probably get mouth sores.
8. You will probably get constipated.

I remember sitting in her office, looking at my husband in total shock and saying, "Just put me in front of a Mack truck, and let's get this over with fast. It's too much to absorb. Look at what this is going to do to my body."

I went home and thought about it—and the more I thought, the more overwhelmed I felt. First was the hair loss. Being tired all the time didn't appeal to me, either—I'm an active person. The prospect was frightening.

Then I thought, *Well, no reason to worry myself sick. I have a husband, two children, grandchildren, family and friends. I don't really want to go to the place in the sky just yet. I want to be able to see my children have more children, and my grandchildren graduate from high school. I can't do that if I'm not around.*

I was to undergo four chemotherapy treatments—one every three weeks, spread out over three months. After I'd discussed my situation with my support group, family and friends, my case didn't seem so bad anymore.

Here are some things you can do to make the situation a little easier:

1. Get a good support system—friends and family are the best. On my first chemo visit, my girlfriend Laura rushed over from work and sat with me to make sure I signed all the treatment-authorization documents.

1. Try to stay positive. It's difficult at times, but you can do it. Think happy thoughts, and keep in mind that it's only temporary. When it's all over, you'll feel better, and in time be able to do the things you want.

Here is a diary of my experiences with chemotherapy and radiation.

**Chemotherapy, Day 1:** Truthfully, I was scared to death. During my first surgery, I'd had a chemo port implanted so I could receive the chemo drip. I walked into a very large room and was told to select a chair. The chairs resemble chaises longues, and the room is not private: You're sharing the experience with everyone else who's receiving chemo that day.

The nurses were great—they explained everything. Once I was seated, a nurse described what she was going to do. She sprayed my port area to numb it, then inserted the needle. Once in place, it felt no more uncomfortable than receiving an IV infusion.

Wearing sterile, gloves and aprons, the nurses brought out the bags of chemo, labeled with our names.

*If they have to wear all that protective gear to put the drip into you, I thought, it can't be good stuff.*

The nurse asked my name and date of birth to ensure that I was getting the dose meant for me. She pumped nausea medicine and steroids into the bag that the chemo would drip from.

During chemo you can eat, sleep, read, play games or just look around, but you can't leave. My companion sat in a chair next to me and offered words of encouragement.

The first session took two hours, and when I arrived home, I didn't feel bad.

**Day 2:** I went back to get a shot to boost my white-cell count, so that I wouldn't get ill. The shot stung like a bee. That night, its effects kicked in: My bones felt like they were on fire. I was told to take allergy medication. It didn't work, but ibuprofen did. Everyone reacts differently.

**Day 3:** I felt the chemo working. It doesn't hurt; it just feels weird—like something crawling in your skin. I felt like I had the flu, but without the

nausea. Instead of being constipated, I had diarrhea and had to return to the doctor for IV rehydration.

**Day 14:** My hair started coming out by the handful. There are several ways to handle this; I chose to get a wig, and had my head shaved in preparation. I'd thought that I would do nothing but cry, but that was not the case: The experience was liberating.

Losing my curly red hair felt like losing a part of my identity. I ordered a wig with straight hair, and my husband felt like he was suddenly married to another woman. So that was my answer to the dilemma: *I just have another personality that I didn't realize I had.*

Being recently retired, I didn't have to work during chemo. I've known people who worked throughout treatment; I admire them.

Here are a few tips:

1. You'll receive lots of information and pamphlets from your doctor. I found these overwhelming, since I couldn't concentrate on reading even books that I liked. But don't throw the information away: You'll eventually need it.
2. You'll receive a quick-reference page on what to do if you get sick or need help. I highly recommend keeping this page where you can reach it.
3. Assemble a survival kit: ice pops, lots of water, nutritional drinks and sports beverages.
4. Have some pre-prepared meals ready for your worst days.

On your last day of chemo, you'll get to ring the bell, to celebrate. I'd expected to be elated, but it was the first time I cried—tears of relief that this part of the experience was over.

As a result of chemo, I lost my eyelashes and eyebrows. My nails became brittle and developed rings that made it look as if I'd been poisoned. A product called Latisse gave me back my lashes and brows within a couple of weeks; my nails are on their own.

**Radiation:** I was told that, because of the type of chemo I'd had, I would receive thirty-three hits of radiation. I was told that it's easier than chemo.

My first day was easy. I had films made, and a nurse marked my skin with a small permanent tattoo dot on the area to be irradiated.

After the procedure, the doctor prescribed a cream to relieve radiation burn. I didn't burn to the point of blisters, but many people do. You'll be smart to get that prescription filled.

Radiation is a little more humiliating than chemo, since your breasts are exposed to the world. The treatment takes about fifteen minutes. It doesn't hurt; you only hear the machine making adjustments. If you stay focused on what you're there for, it's relatively easy.

Treatments take place every day, Monday through Friday, and you're not allowed to miss any. For me, the greatest pleasure was having the therapy dog to love while I waited.

Some pointers:

1. Wear a soft bra or camisole so it won't chafe against your skin, which the radiation makes very sensitive.
2. Wear two-piece outfits, as you'll be changing into and out of them every day.
3. Keep your prescriptions for pain and nausea medications filled, and keep the pills on hand. They work.

After finishing the treatments, I had reconstructive surgery. I feel whole again. If it's an option you're considering, I highly recommend it.

Be positive. Know what's going to happen, then survive. Believe me: Your life will take on a whole new meaning. Every hour of every day will count, for tomorrow is guaranteed to no one.

#### **About the author:**

Lynn Lazos was the fourth child and the only girl in a family of all boys. "I grew up in a modest neighborhood. My father was a chief petty officer in the Navy, and my mother was a stay-at-home mom, later to become a hairdresser. I didn't get the chance to go to college, so I entered the Federal Civil Service. I've been married for forty-five years and have two children and five grandchildren. I worked as a contracting officer and ended my career as a small-business specialist, working for the person who reported our office statistics to the President. I've never been published, unless you consider all the contracts written for the Army. I felt compelled to write because one of my brothers, who's an author, suggested that I write about my experience, so I figured, *What do I have to lose?* One of his book-club members is an ex-nurse, and she suggested that I send my story to *Pulse*. I've always wanted to be published. I have a Mensa friend who said that if I could learn to spell, I would be a great writer. I took German in high school, and haven't been able to spell ever since."

#### **Story editor:**

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