

“Why breast cancer survivors don’t take their medication, and what can be done about it”

For the majority of breast cancer patients diagnosed in early and locally advanced stage of disease, the treatment doesn’t end with surgery alone.

As the most common subtype of breast cancer is estrogen and progesterone receptor-positive, patients will be required to take drugs that modulate these receptors in the body or decrease the synthesis of these hormones in the body.

The two most common and important groups of drugs are SERM (Selective Estrogen Receptor Modulator) and Aromatase inhibitors. Patients are required to take these medications for up to 5-10 years of life to prevent the recurrence of cancer.

Why patient don’t take their medications as advised? several studies are looking into this aspect. Up to 40% of patients discontinue the medication early and 30% of patients take the medication less frequently than directed.

Reasons for non-adherence-

1. **Side effects** – These medications have a variety of side effects like weight gain, sexual side effects, joint pain, depression, and sleeplessness. A seemingly healthy patient after surgery finds it difficult and unnecessary to face these types of and such magnitude of side effects. They find it better to discontinue medication.
2. **Cost**- cancer medications are still costly. Be it production cost or issues related to patents, the higher cost makes medication far from the reach of many patients. Even after insurance patients tend to discontinue drugs.

3. **Poor motivation and depression-** Both of these have been consistently found to be important in nonadherence. Patients tend to be poorly motivated to continue the treatment due to social causes and depression can be due psychological aspect of surgical trauma and the future course of the disease.

Interventions that have been found effective in different studies-

1. **Medication necessity and importance-** Explaining to the patient the importance of medicine in preventing recurrence along with the side effects which are manageable and are not comparable to the recurrence of the disease.
2. **Cost-** Making medicines affordable and within reach of patients is most important as socio-economic conditions also play a role in patients deliberately skipping doses or reducing the dose of the drug.
3. **Forgetting-** Patients who tend to forget to take medications can be reminded by follow-up letters, phones, texts, mobile phone application notifications, and calls.
4. **Managing side effects-** Endocrine therapy side effects can be managed with regular follow-up with the medical oncologist.

Proper care and support in the form of social support, and psychological support are required to overcome the side effects of drugs. Everyone involved in the treatment from patient to doctors, staff, and family members are important for proper compliance with the drugs.