

# Cancer Creates...

STRENGTH • COURAGE • HOPE



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## PATIENT PERSPECTIVES

# Be Your Own Best Advocate

By Pam Alson



My journey began in 1996, at the age of 46, when an abdominal mass was discovered by my new gynecologist. Previously, my care was in the hands of an internist, whom I saw for well over 20 years. When he retired, I brought my file to my new doctor, who found the report from my most recent Pap test that showed “irregular cells.” Obviously, my prior doctor did not find this information important enough to follow up on

or even mention to me, but my new doctor took this report very seriously. Within six weeks and after several tests, I had surgery to remove the mass which led to a total hysterectomy. I received a call from my gynecologist and was told, “It’s benign.” I’ll never forget that feeling of relief.

Four years later, I switched to a new gynecologist. Once again, I personally carried my file to my new doctor. Four years later, another pelvis mass was identified and I underwent surgery in 2004. When the surgeon coldly looked me straight in the eye and informed me that I had a recurrence of ovarian cancer, I immediately responded, “I didn’t have cancer in 1996.” I told him that my doctor informed me that the mass was benign. Without missing a beat, he said, “You must have misheard.” I replied that when you are waiting for the results of a biopsy, you don’t mistake the word cancer for benign.

## The File Held the Answer

As I sat there like a deer in headlights, trying to understand how this could be happening, I continued to press my point. Wouldn’t there have been a discussion of possible treatment or just any reference to my cancer in the past eight years from either of my two previous doctors? Without responding to my question, he pulled a piece of paper from a file. Yes, that file. The one I had dutifully carried from doctor to doctor, but never read myself. The 1996 pathology report clearly stated: “Ovarian Cancer.”

That was my first important lesson. The start of my advocacy. The beginning of trying to maintain some control over a mostly uncontrollable journey.

## Staying Informed and Educated is Key

With much thanks to the doctors and staff of The Valley Hospital, I fortunately am still here today to pass this lesson on. I can’t stress enough the importance of always getting a copy of every report, of any kind, and reading it. Even if you don’t understand every word, it is amazing the things we begin to pick up on, which lead us to ask questions that might even lead to further options.

I strongly advise keeping a notebook, similar to the one Valley provides each cancer patient. Keeping all your records manageable, available for your review and easy to transport or copy is essential in helping to lower the stress that always accompanies this journey.

## The Journey Continues

After three additional surgeries for ovarian cancer recurrences, multiple treatments of chemotherapy, radiation and another surgery for an intestinal blockage (resulting in a severe infection), my notebook is mighty thick. As a matter of fact, I now have several notebooks. I have learned a whole lot on my journey and, hopefully and gratefully, I will continue to be given the opportunity to learn more in the coming years.

## We’re Here to Help

For more information about cancer support services for patients and caregivers, please call Valley’s oncology social workers at **201-634-5787**.



COMPREHENSIVE CANCER CARE

# Got Chemo Brain? Here's How to Fight it

Have you ever said any of the following:

- “I can’t remember anything!”
- “I am so forgetful with names.”
- “I can’t seem to concentrate!”
- “I feel foggy.”
- “I can’t multitask anymore!”
- “Where has my brain gone?!”



If so, you may have what’s referred to as “chemo brain.” Chemo brain is a term used to describe cognitive or thought problems that

occur during and after cancer treatment. Patients may have trouble concentrating or focusing; difficulty remembering details or managing daily activities; problems with word or name recall; slowed thinking; trouble learning new things; or difficulty multitasking.

Chemo brain is real. Imaging studies have shown changes in brain structure both acutely after completing chemotherapy, and long after primary treatment has been completed.

## Does Chemo Brain Go Away?

Every patient experiences chemo brain differently. The good news is that chemo brain isn’t a progressive condition, and most people notice an improvement over time (some within a few months, most within one to two years). However, some patients have reported long-term symptoms.

## Can Medication Help?

There is no “magic pill” for chemo brain, but some therapies in certain situations have shown promise. Talk to your doctor about whether any medications, herbal therapies or other therapies may help.

## Tips for Everyday Living

Keeping chemo brain at bay can be a daily struggle. The following strategies and activities may help:

- When trying to focus/concentrate, use low-level activity (e.g., squeezing a stress ball, tapping your toe or sitting on a ball).
- Keep a notepad close by. If a thought pops into your head, write it down.
- Alternate difficult/unpleasant tasks with enjoyable ones.

- Take breaks. Don’t take on more than you can handle – get up and move around.
- Talk to loved ones about what you’re experiencing, or attend a support group.
- Try Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction techniques.
- Exercise regularly and get plenty of restful sleep.

## Helpful Resources

Whether you’re fighting chemo brain or are just looking for ways to improve your health and well-being, the following programs and services can help:

- **Living Strong, Living Well** – A free, 12-week exercise program offered at the Ridgewood YMCA to help patients and survivors build strength, flexibility, endurance and functional ability. Call 201-444-5600, ext. 330 to register.
- **Live Well Cancer Survivor Program** – A free, eight-week program, offered at the Wyckoff YMCA, which includes fitness, nutrition, yoga and other resources to support a healthy lifestyle. Call 201-891-2081 for details.
- **Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)** – MBSR is a unique meditation technique that enables participants to develop a heightened awareness of their bodies and emotions, as well as learn to work with their stress, pain and challenges of everyday life. Classes are offered through Valley’s Center for Integrative Medicine. Call 201-389-0075 for more information and costs.
- **Kula for Karma Yoga** – This free yoga program is open to patients and survivors and is offered at The Valley Hospital. Call 201-291-6090 to register.
- **T’ai Chi Chih** – Participants build strength and improve balance while performing a series of slow, gentle movements. Classes are held at the Unitarian Society of Ridgewood, 113 Cottage Place, Ridgewood. The cost is \$75 for eight weeks. Call 201-634-5325 to register.

For a complete list of classes and programs, check out the latest issue of *Valley* magazine. Visit [ValleyHealth.com](http://ValleyHealth.com) and click on “Programs and Services,” then “Valley Magazine.”

## Cancer Survivorship Series

### Thriving Through and Beyond Cancer

The Cancer Survivorship Series is an ongoing series that educates, informs and empowers patients to better manage their health and enhance their quality of life during and after cancer treatment. Workshops are held at the Blumenthal Cancer Center in the Luckow Pavilion, 1 Valley Health Plaza, Paramus. Space is limited; to register, please **Suzanne Kaufman, L.S.W.**, at 201-634-5422 or [skaufma2@valleyhealth.com](mailto:skaufma2@valleyhealth.com).

### Genetics, Family History and Survivorship

Thursday, April 6, 6-7:30 p.m.



**Rachel Sugalski, M.S., LCGC**, Genetic Counselor at The Valley Hospital, will discuss hereditary cancer conditions, with a focus on hereditary breast cancer. Participants will learn about features in a family history that could suggest an inherited predisposition to cancer. The genetic testing process will be reviewed along with a discussion on management guidelines for those with inherited cancer conditions.

### There's More Online

Visit [ValleyHealthCancerCenter.com](http://ValleyHealthCancerCenter.com) and click on “For Patients & Families,” then “Cancer Creates Newsletter,” to find current and previous issues of *Cancer Creates*.



### We Want to Hear from You!

Got an inspiring story or helpful tip to share? Let us know, and it may appear in our next edition of *Cancer Creates!* Email submissions to [sardito@valleyhealth.com](mailto:sardito@valleyhealth.com).