



## Beating cancer odds

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I was sitting in church one April watching the church Easter cantata.

Before the cantata started, a friend and I chatted, as we sat side by side in the pew.

I confided that I was having some physical problems. My stomach was swollen and uncomfortable.

She looked alarmed, saying that I should see a physician right away.

So a week later, I found myself in my doctor's office, describing my symptoms. With a scope, he listened to my abdomen, punched around, asking questions, trying to pinpoint the pain.

He ordered an ultrasound and other tests.

"We'll find out what's going on," he promised.

One week later, the ultrasound revealed there was a tumor on my right ovary.

My doctor made arrangements for me to see a gynecologist in Jonesboro.

After an examination and a look at my x-rays,, the gynecologist agreed there was a tumor that needed to be removed right away.

He ordered a CA125 screening blood test that would indicate if the tumor was maglinant or not. However, he said, surgery was the only way to know for sure. He scheduled surgery for a complete hysterectomy.

One week later, he telephoned that the elevated blood test indicated the tumor was probably cancerous. He would not do the surgery but would, instead, send me to Memphis to a gynecological oncologist who specializes in ovarian cancer..

I was ill informed about ovarian cancer. No one in my family had ever been diagnosed with ovarian cancer. But I knew there were few survivors.

I now know that ovarian cancer is the fifth most frequent cause of cancer death in women with 50 percent of all cases in women older than 65 years. Just two out of five women diagnosed with it can expect to live beyond five years.

Such bleak odds are rooted in the difficulty detecting the condition early. By the time it is caught, the cancer is too advanced to treat in 70 percent of cases. It is a deadly cancer.

It is estimated there will be 22,280 new cases in 2012 in the United States. And 15,500 deaths.

In my case the cancer was advanced. I was showing signs of stomach bloating caused by ascites (fluid). I was also having pelvic pain...

In just a few days, the surgery was performed. As expected, the tumor was malignant. While I was still on the operating table, the surgeon told my children that the odds were against me.

The surgeon did numerous biopsies to see the extent of the cancer.

Stages of cancer relate to how far the cancer has spread. The higher the stage number, the more widespread is the cancer..

There are four stages in ovarian cancer, and I was stage 111. That meant that my cancer had spread to other body locations within the abdomen.

The surgeon removed all the cancer that he safely could, electing to kill any remaining cancer cells with chemotherapy..

In two weeks, I was scheduled for my first intravenous chemo infusion. I was hospitalized for that first slow drip treatment but those that followed were outpatient. I was told I would have six to nine months of chemo..

Not long after. I had minor surgery to insert a port-a-cath. It is a small device that is used to make administration of chemotherapy easier. The port-a-cath, about the size of a quarter, is placed under the skin in the upper part of the chest. It has a small reservoir that is connected via a soft thin catheter to a major vein inside the chest. Through this device, chemo can be administered or blood drawn with less discomfort than a more typical "needle stick." After chemo treatments are completed, the port-a-cath can be surgically removed.

Each chemo treatment, every three or four weeks, left me drained, weak and sick. When my white blood count dipped too low, I would have to wait a few days until it climbed higher before chemo could be given. I was also taking an enormous amount of pills each day.

Dealing with the illness, fatigue, and pain was devastating. I had no appetite and lost weight. There were days when I wondered if I would make it. But I had support from family members, friends and church members, too.

I tried to keep my spirits up by reading upbeat literature, but even then, I could concentrate on only a page or two. I spent most of my days lying in bed or on the couch, tired and sick.

But the day finally came when the treatments were done. After that, I took three more months of chemo pills, but no more infusions.

My surgeon did what he called a "second look" surgery. He wanted to do additional biopsies to see the results of all that chemotherapy.

I awoke in my hospital bed to hear the surgeon telling my children that he found no signs of cancer.

The lab reports would show that I was "cancer free."

With the aggressiveness of a Memphis surgeon, and a combination of chemo drugs, I was a survivor.

That was 18 years ago.

Yes, it's true that if cancer is diagnosed and treated in its early stage, there is a good chance it can be cured.

But, in other cases, where the cancer is advanced, some people do beat the odds.

My younger brother survived lung cancer and my sister survived breast cancer.

That's a pretty good record.

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