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CANCER IN AMERICA

# Living After Cancer

by Judith Newman  
published: 06/20/2010

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Leukemia survivor Kenechi Udeze with daughter Bailey in front of a photo of him during his NFL days. He gave up his pro-football career after cancer treatment resulted in nerve damage.

In 2002, Gilly Youner, then 41, was seeing her gastroenterologist when a urine sample was revealed to contain blood. A quick visit to a urologist then found a tumor on her bladder--the New York City architect was diagnosed with late Stage 3 cancer. If Youner didn't have her bladder removed immediately, she was told, she had less than a year to live. Even with surgery and treatment, her chances of dying within three years were about 75%, so the married mother of a 5-year-old had her bladder removed and underwent 12 rounds of chemotherapy.

Eight years later, Youner is cancer-free. However, cancer treatment destroyed her ability to conceive, and she suffered bouts of brain fuzziness for a year or so after chemo. She had always had low blood pressure, but now she must take medication for high blood pressure. "I'm happy for every day," she says. "But at the same time, it's not like everything just returns to what it was."

Youner belongs to a large and growing group--cancer survivors. There are 12 million in the U.S. alone, a number that has more than tripled in the last 30 years, according to Livestrong, the nonprofit group founded by renowned cyclist Lance Armstrong to support cancer survivors. "Cancer treatments are more successful," says Dr. Catherine Alfano, program director of the National Cancer Institute's Office of Cancer Survivorship. "We also have an aging Baby Boomer population, and more people will be diagnosed and

treated for cancer than ever before." But, she points out, "Even while we have more diverse types and more successful treatments, they all still exact a toll on the body." As a result, long-term survivors like Youner are the subjects of considerable medical attention and research.

### 12 Celebrity Cancer Survivors

Last year Livestrong surveyed more than 2000 cancer survivors about their concerns. What was most interesting, notes Ruth Rechis, the foundation's director of evaluation and research, was that "even up to 20 years out, no one had had all their issues resolved." While the problems survivors face vary according to their disease and treatment, here are some of the major health issues reported.

#### Fatigue

Many people know that chemotherapy treatments can cause profound tiredness, but they may not realize that fatigue can persist in some survivors for years. "We're not entirely sure, but it may be due to unchecked inflammation in the body," says Dr. Patricia Ganz, a professor at UCLA School of Medicine. Treatment could possibly push the immune system into overdrive, and in certain patients, the resulting inflammation could increase fatigue "as if the body were constantly fighting off a bad flu," Dr. Alfano adds.

### 6 Ways to Help Someone Who Has Cancer

#### Pain

Kenechi Udeze was four seasons into playing for the NFL's Minnesota Vikings when searing migraines sent him to his physician in 2008. The headaches turned out to be a symptom of acute lymphoblastic leukemia. Udeze underwent a bone-marrow transplant the same year and was declared cancer-free. But the nerve damage, or neuropathy, from the aggressive treatment he underwent ended his pro-football career. "Nerves regenerate very slowly, and my feet, my grasp, they just weren't what they were," explains Udeze, now 27 and living in Seattle. The former defensive end has also been left with severe chronic pain. "In the middle of the night, my toes and ankles contract so hard, it's like a cramp times 10," he says. Neuropathic pain can be caused by some forms of chemotherapy. Radiation and surgery may also leave the patient with scar tissue, leading to painful tightening of the skin's surface or internal adhesions. "Many cancer survivors need pain control," Dr. Ganz says. "They need palliative care like you get at the end of life. Only here, they're not dying and suffering--they're living and suffering."

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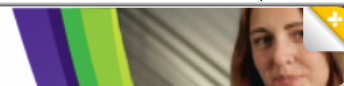
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Last year in the Journal of Cancer Survivorship, 74 women were interviewed at least one year after the completion of their breast-cancer treatments. One of their most common complaints was what patients and doctors call "chemo brain," a loss of memory and an inability to concentrate. No one is sure why it occurs, Dr. Alfano says. "Survivors are telling us they're having cognitive problems, but when we give them standard neuropsychological tests, we can't detect impairment. It may be the tests' fault, so we're using brain MRIs and PET scans to measure brain function." According to Dr. Alfano, one current theory is that people who carry a certain gene associated with Alzheimer's may be more vulnerable to chemo brain than people without the gene.

**Infertility and sexual dysfunction**

Cancer treatment can leave many patients--men and women--infertile. Even when it doesn't, it can impair a woman's fertility by reducing her total number of eggs. Some survivors also report suffering sexual dysfunction after they've been pronounced cancer-free, which could possibly result from a combination of physical, hormonal, and psychological factors.

**The Keys to Cancer Prevention**

**Depression and anxiety**

Survivors have an expression: "Cancer may leave your body, but it never leaves your mind." Depression and anxiety could be natural reactions to receiving a traumatic diagnosis of a serious illness like cancer, but in some cases, they may be the result of treatment. "Clinicians are investigating if depression could be the result of the body's hyperactive immune system," Dr. Alfano says. "The impulse that helps you heal when you're sick, of wanting to curl up in bed, may be part of an immune reaction."

There's also the fear of recurrence and "survivor's guilt," says Dr. Ganz, especially for those who have seen fellow patients die. "In my two years after treatment," says Beth Silverman, 32, a breast-cancer survivor in Baltimore, "I buried 30 or 40 friends I made in support groups and through cancer networks."

**Other cancers**

Of the 12 million survivors, 25% have ended up having multiple cancers--not just recurrences but, rather, entirely different cancers, according to Doug Ulman, president and CEO of Livestrong. While in college, Ulman was diagnosed with chondrosarcoma, a cartilage tumor; later, he faced two separate incidences of melanoma. Whether he had a susceptibility to cancer or whether the diseases were related to his treatments is unclear. "We don't know what roles genetics and treatment play, but we know treatment has an impact," he says.

As research on cancer survivors proceeds, solutions to their problems will likely be discovered or devised. For now, Dr. Alfano says, "physicians shouldn't talk about patients going back to normal after treatment. We want to help people find the best 'new normal.'"

"Oncologists never use the word 'cured' anymore," Silverman adds. "They say there is 'no evidence of disease,' or what we survivors call 'NED.' Of course, there are many costs to treatment, physical and mental. But I'm so grateful. An expression survivors use is 'NED's my boyfriend.' I'm so happy to be dancing with NED!"

Are you a cancer survivor? Connect with others at PARADE's partner website, [EverydayHealth](#).

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**Thank you!**

by *tieri* posted: 06/20/2010 11:57:AM

4 years ago my husband was diagnosed with AML, he went thru chemo and a bone marrow transplant. If we had not discovered it he would have died within 4 months. True he's suffering with chronic fatigue & pain but he's ALIVE.

**REPLY | Number of replies:0**

**Thanks, but no thanks**

by *greensleeves* posted: 06/20/2010 09:50:AM

What a complete downer of a story on a beautiful Father's Day! Thanks a lot, guys.

On the other hand, thanks for being honest and bucking the pink-ribbon PR campaign of cancer being a fun life-style complete with silly hats and good times for all. Cancer is a hideous disease, and it destroys all it touches. It's shadow never leaves.

Take home message for me: I don't get tested for cancer, because frankly, I couldn't go through the treatment and the much-diminished after life. Better to live blissfully unaware for as many years as possible, and exit quickly and gracefully if the worst happens.

We need to allow the cancer conversation to broaden to respect various individual approaches to the disease, include the approach to opt out of the "battle" - no testing, no treatment.

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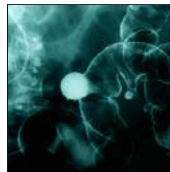
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