

New Connections

HELPING YOU FIND YOUR WAY AFTER TREATMENT



Issue 21

A vibrant field of yellow poppies in full bloom under a clear blue sky. The flowers are in the foreground, with some in sharp focus and others slightly blurred in the background. The overall scene is bright and cheerful.

Ovarian cancer survivor not only believes in miracles, but she also believes she is a “walking miracle” herself.

In December of 1999 – Irene Rathermel found that she couldn’t button her pants. Many women would have written that condition off to too many holiday treats, but Rathermel was also feeling bloated and tired and didn’t have much of an appetite. Then she thought back to her job as a patient accounts representative in physician’s billing at The University of Wisconsin Medical Foundation in Madison, Wisconsin. Among the many things she had learned was the importance of paying attention to unusual symptoms. “If you don’t take care of yourself,” she says, “no one else will.”

Rathermel made her appointment with her doctor

That turned out to be a smart move because Rathermel’s doctor discovered a large amount of fluid around her stomach and immediately ordered an ultrasound. Soon after, Rathermel learned she had stage III ovarian cancer. Instead of celebrating the holidays with her family, she would soon be facing extensive surgery.

Clinging to the only good news there was

In January, Rathermel had a hysterectomy; her ovaries and a sizable portion of her omentum, the membrane that lines some of the organs in the abdominal cavity, were also removed. Because the cancer had spread throughout her abdomen, her doctor also performed cytoreductive surgery, or debulking, in which he removed as much cancerous tissue as possible, priming the area to better receive chemotherapy or radiation.

The only good news was that the cancer had not yet reached her lymph nodes or distant sites in the body. But Rathermel’s prognosis wasn’t good. About 76% of women with ovarian cancer survive at least one year after diagnosis, and only 45% survive longer than five years after diagnosis.

Another glimmer of hope on the horizon

At the suggestion of her physician and with the blessing of her family, Rathermel decided to look into clinical trials. Her doctor had heard about a large trial involving intraperitoneal (IP) chemotherapy. She decided to try it.

Unlike the standard intravenous (IV) method of delivering chemo, IP therapy is given directly into the abdomen. In Rathermel’s case, a catheter and pecan-sized port were placed directly into the left side of her abdomen. She was also given standard IV chemo.

The combined effect was very hard to tolerate, but Rathermel didn’t look back. “You just do what you have to do,” she says of the chemo.

At the time, she was in her mid-60s, and like most people, she lost her hair and her energy, but through it all, Rathermel remained positive. “I have strong family ties and a strong spiritual life. I never doubted things would be OK.”

And they were OK. Now cancer-free Rathermel is religious about her follow-up care and also about sharing her experience

with others. She's involved in the Cancer Survivors Network^(SM) and Relay For Life[®] and regularly attends survivor meetings.

**For more cancer information, call 1-800-ACS-2345
or visit www.cancer.org, anytime, day or night.**

[Contact Us](#) | [New Connections Home Page](#) | [Legal & Privacy Information](#)

This information is for informational purposes only. This information is not a substitute for professional medical advice. Do not use this information to diagnose or treat a health problem or disease without consulting a qualified healthcare provider. Please consult your healthcare provider with any questions or concerns you may have regarding your condition. Use of this online service is subject to the disclaimer and the terms and conditions.

Copyright 2008 © American Cancer Society
National Home Office, 250 Williams Street, Atlanta, Georgia 30303-1002