

Celebrate!

Glitz and glamour are definitely back and to celebrate we invited four readers, who usually find buying evening wear a problem, to help us model this season's latest fashions. With help from Debbie Young, fitting consultant at Amoena and Michelle Norris, fashion advisor for John Lewis, our four readers were given a fabulous new look for this year's party season.

“Help me disguise my lymphoedema sleeve...”

Karen, aged 39

"My main problem in choosing evening wear is that I have lymphoedema and so I have to wear a lymphoedema sleeve and glove on a daily basis. Also, because I need on-going chemotherapy treatment I have been fitted with a hickman line which means I am unable to wear low necklines. Before my surgery I used to wear strappy dresses and feel quite sad that I now have to choose clothes which are practical rather than styles which I really like."

Karen's hickman line is noticeable even above a standard bra line and therefore prevents her from wearing anything low cut. In order to conceal the hickman line, Debbie fitted Karen with a Pamela bra from the Amoena range which has a pretty lace camisole effect. Karen has a great figure, so Michelle selected a dress that would show this to its full advantage. Although the dress was sleeveless, she teamed it with a beautiful organza wrap that helped to conceal Karen's lymphoedema sleeve. Because Karen had never worn a wrap before, Michelle showed how this could be tied either at the front or back. For an alternative look, Michelle recommended a loose fitting chiffon jacket. Finally, because Karen is most self conscious about the join from her sleeve to her glove, Michelle completed the look with a chunky beaded bracelet that concealed the join perfectly.

The verdict:

"Although this dress is absolutely beautiful, I would never have picked it for myself as it doesn't have any sleeves. I wasn't keen on the idea of wearing a wrap as I felt that this would restrict my movement, but once tied it was extremely comfortable and I really love the overall look."

“I want to look more balanced in tighter fitting tops...”

Vivienne, aged 60

"My main problem when buying evening wear is that I am a 38D and so I have difficulties finding suitable bras to wear with delicate evening dresses. The bras I like don't hold my breast form firmly in place and so I often end up feeling lopsided. I also have a complexion that doesn't suit black and this also limits my choice."

Choosing the correct bra and breast form are important to ensure you look balanced and feel comfortable. Because Vivienne often feels lopsided, Debbie fitted her with a different sized breast form to the one she usually wears, which filled the cup of her bra perfectly. Vivienne also felt that bras for bigger busted ladies were often frumpy and she was keen to wear lingerie that would make her feel feminine again. Debbie selected several bras for Vivienne to try and she particularly liked the Jill Bra, which

has under-wiring for additional support. Although black remains the most popular choice for evening wear, it is possible to find alternatives. Michelle selected this beautiful full length dress in a rich burgundy velvet with decorative beading. Although the dress had slightly wider straps and a higher neckline than Vivienne would like to wear, it's fitted style and long side split, added a glamorous and sexy touch.

The verdict:

"Although I would normally choose dresses with a lower neckline, I have to admit I feel really secure and look really balanced. I adore the dress – particularly the split, if I can't show off my cleavage I might as well show a bit of leg! I am also absolutely delighted with the range of bras available from Amoena – I haven't felt this feminine since my operation in 1992. I would certainly recommend women in my position have a professional fitting – high street stores just don't have the products or the experience to fit them."

"Find me something to hide my scar..."**Christine, aged 49**

"I had a mastectomy in 1995 and due to high scarring I find it really difficult to find suitable evening wear. Although I wear a self supporting breast form, most of the dresses I like are very low cut and I am very self conscious about revealing my scarring."

Because Christine has quite extensive scarring and therefore feels more comfortable in higher necked clothes, Michelle selected a beautiful sequined short sleeve top, which is glamorous and yet conceals her scarring both at the neckline and under her arm. Although the neckline is quite high cut, the overall look is softened by the use of a very sheer fabric. Debbie fitted Christine with an Ariane Bra, from the Amoena range, which follows the shape of her Classic Contact breast form perfectly. To complete the outfit, Michelle chose a classic velvet skirt and matching jacket with a feather fringe. She explains, "Separates are very versatile and are big news again this season. Velvet is extremely classical and never dates, but for a more contemporary look, try a leather skirt or trousers with a sequined top and select a trendy tuxedo to complete your look!"

The verdict:

"Following my surgery I no longer feel comfortable in evening dresses and prefer to wear separates if possible. Although I wear a self supporting breast form, I am concerned that necklines will gape and reveal my scarring. I was really pleased to find a top that covered my scar and yet still looked really elegant and feminine."

"I want to feel feminine again..."**Lyn, aged 45**

"I had a partial mastectomy in January 2000 and since taking tamoxifen I am uncomfortable with the extra weight I have gained. I also feel quite self conscious about the way my breast form moves in my bra and shows through t-shirts and no longer feel comfortable wearing tight fitting clothes."

Following partial surgery or breast reconstruction, it may sometimes be necessary to wear a small prosthesis to help restore your natural balance. Lyn was wearing a full

breast form which was very heavy and made her self conscious about wearing fitted tops. Because Lyn's surgery had only removed the lower part of her breast, Debbie fitted her with a Contact Lower Partial breast form which adheres to the body and can therefore be worn without the support of a bra.

This gave Michelle the opportunity to suggest Lyn tried a strappy or strapless dress. Lyn was also conscious about her tummy, and wanted a dress that would help disguise this, so Michelle chose this beautiful purple dress in heavy silk which is cleverly tailored to hang naturally from the bust line, without clinging to the tummy and hip area. As this dress has a tie-up at the back, it allows the straps to be easily adjusted so that it can be worn with a slightly higher neckline if required.

The verdict:

"I was really surprised when Amoena suggested I wear a dress without a bra and couldn't see how my breast form would stay in place, but the partial breast form felt really secure and comfortable. Normally dresses I like are very clingy, but when I tried this dress on, my tummy just seemed to disappear! I can't believe how feminine and glamorous I feel – I never thought I'd be able to wear this type of dress again."

Altered Images

How others react and how to handle it

Recovering from breast surgery and cancer is not just about managing your own feelings – it's also about coping with those of everyone else around you. Just how will loved ones react to the new you? Why do some people behave so strangely and what can you do to take charge of the situation? Bob Price, lecturer at the Royal College of Nursing and a consultant in Body Image Care, looks at some of the common reactions to breast cancer surgery and describes how an understanding of others' feelings can help you deal with people's reactions more effectively.

"In hospital it was like you were bullet proof – no one reacted that strangely to how you looked after surgery. They had seen it all before. Going home was a real worry though, because I wasn't sure how friends and family would react."

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When others avoid the issue

Simon is a perfect example. He had been married to Lisa for nearly fifteen years when she developed breast cancer and had to have a mastectomy. Eager to be of practical help to his wife he rushed around making useful arrangements and talking about helping her to recuperate at home. There was no shortage of enthusiasm or commitment, but this was all directed to other aspects of Lisa's well-being. Simon was avoiding discussion, touch or eye contact with Lisa's scar.

"It was as if Simon had sectioned that part of my body off from me" explains Lisa, "as though it wasn't quite me anymore. I got lots of cuddles and he held my hand. We talked about home, work, a holiday but never about my breast or the surgery itself."

Psychologists call this 'avoidance behaviour' and in Simon it was exhibited in touch, the direction of gaze and the way in which he talked about Lisa's health. Lisa was unsure how to deal with this and began to worry that her husband was rejecting her. In fact, upon discussion it became apparent that Simon was coping with her change in appearance by avoiding direct contact with that part of her body. As he put it: "I remember thinking that I wasn't sure how I would react to that part of Lisa. I'd never seen a mastectomy scar before and I was concerned that I might stare or grimace. I was worried that my reaction might upset her even more so I started to give her love elsewhere in what I could do for her. Although this helped me cope, I didn't realise how upsetting it was for Lisa."

If you are faced with similar avoidance behaviour in a partner, you do need to allow time for them to come to terms with the situation. This doesn't mean they love you any less, it is simply their way of coping with the changes in your appearance that you have already dealt with yourself. This said, intimacy can be regained by talking about your own experience of the surgery and your new appearance. How does this part of your skin feel in the shower? Do the sensations feel the same? What tickles, feels pleasant or uncomfortable when this part of your body is touched? How does it make you feel when your partner glimpses your appearance as you dress or undress? Giving a partner permission to look at and think about your new

appearance is the key to helping them deal with their own emotions and concerns. A partner needs to know that you can still obtain pleasure from touch in this area, that you have explored the sensations for yourself and that they are OK. "I talked to Simon about how my surgery area felt and then one night after a great dinner I lit candles all around the sitting room, put some music on and led Simon's fingers across my body. He cried and we cuddled – it broke all the barriers down."

When others become obsessed

Another classic reaction was exhibited by Margaret's older sister Theresa, following Margaret's diagnosis of breast cancer. Margaret remarked on how thoroughly organised her sister was but how everything had to be reasoned-out. Theresa focused on Margaret's surgery and her condition. She read copiously about breast cancer and consumed articles on the psychology of coping with the disease. Frequent visits first to the hospital and then at home convinced Margaret that her sister was obsessed with her illness, treatment and rehabilitation.

A relative or partner who adopts this type of focusing behaviour is doing so in an effort to rationalise your disease and your journey back to health. Such individuals seem to believe that discussing your surgery, prosthesis, diet, physiotherapy and further health check ups is inherently comforting. They reason that it is better to treat the experience as a problem to be overcome and allow relatively little opportunity for you or themselves to feel miserable or fed up. As Margaret says: "Sometimes I felt as though I was just an add-on to my medical condition. Theresa seemed fascinated by my health and looked on me as her "project". Eventually I had to tell her to ease off, because it was all just too intense."

Relatives who focus in this way are sometimes coping with their own feelings of helplessness. They want to help you control something that by definition may not be totally controllable. Wanting surety in an unsure world, they look for comfort within accounts of new treatments. Their need to protect and contain hurt drives their focusing behaviour. In this instance there is a need to help them to understand that feeling better and looking better isn't a straightforward process. You have rough days and sometimes it is just enough to cope with looking presentable and feeling good that others don't know that you have had surgery. Explain to them that although today you might be happy, you can't control how you might feel tomorrow but that no matter how you might feel you are still yourself beneath it all. Showing that such ups and downs are part of every day life now as before, can help relatives to relax. You haven't changed, you don't always have to like how you look or feel, but that's not their responsibility. It is enough that they are there for you, through the whole gambit of your emotions.

When others reach for the cotton wool

Susan once described her husband Don as an apprentice 'mummy man'. She laughed when she said it but there was a note of anger in her voice. Three months after coming home from surgery he was still busy organising her encounters with others. He would make a point of explaining her health to family and friends so that they had little need to ask and she had no need to field their questions. He orchestrated social events so that he was always at her side and she was never left alone with anyone judged inept enough to distress her with questions about her appearance or recovery. His credit card took a battering as he spent generously on clothes for her that swamped her appearance, leaving her, as she puts it 'contour-

less’.

Cocooning is a reaction which is ostensibly designed to avoid conflict or discomfort for you, but which also serves a secondary purpose of helping the relative or partner to feel busy and protective. Carried to extremes it might leave you feeling isolated, incompetent or patronised. Deciding how to respond involves subtle judgement. Asking a loved one too abruptly or early to let you manage your own encounters, can seem like a rejection of care. However, allowing this type of reaction to carry on and develop could mean that you become increasingly isolated from the very social life that helps you to feel normal.

Susan’s response was pragmatic. Little by little and regularly she demonstrated to her husband what sorts of social situations, discussions and level of reference to her appearance she felt confident about. She made appointments and invited friends to visit trying out her new found confidence. At the same time, she was careful to note her appreciation of Don’s support and attentiveness. His support was always welcome but it shouldn’t be exclusive support. As she explains: “Don needed to know he wasn’t the only person able to offer help. I didn’t call him the "mummy man" whilst that was going on, but later, when I was back in the swing of things and he’d relaxed a bit, I did tell him and we laughed. We just had this vision of him wrapping me up in bandages!”

The stories of Lisa, Margaret and Susan aren’t especially unique. The reactions they encountered happen frequently enough and usually for the very best of reasons. When others adjust to your change in appearance and threat of illness, it takes time to get over the hurt they feel. It may not be enough though to simply wait for partners, relatives and friends to work their way through such reactions. In the interim it can be frustrating and distressing to deal with their approach to you. A better strategy is often a more active one. Find out from friends and relatives how they feel and how they imagine their approach is helping you. It is important to remember that although friends and family will be concerned for your well-being, some may find it difficult to know how to react or what to say to help you. Helping others to understand how you are coping and how they can help in your recovery, is often a very constructive solution. Often all others need is a friendly nudge in the right direction and permission to continue treating you as they did before your diagnosis of breast cancer.

Bob Price, lecturer at the Royal College of Nursing and a consultant in Body Image Care, runs workshops for nurses and other interested organisations regarding altered body image and can be contacted on tel: 01252 512401 or via e-mail: bob.price@rcn.org.uk

Dress To Impress

Make your festive celebrations a night to remember with this year's fabulous range of party clothes

Finding the perfect party outfit is difficult at the best of times, but following breast surgery, you may be feeling that the vast majority of evening wear is no longer suitable, as it's either too low or won't look right with a bra. Although plunging necklines may no longer be an option, you can still look stunning – it's just a matter of knowing the styles that will suit you best. We take a look at the latest evening wear fashions and show how specific problems can be overcome, offering practical solutions that you may not have considered before.

How to hide high scarring

Although modern surgical techniques try to ensure that scarring is kept to a minimum, you may find that a plunging neckline is no longer suitable. Choose from these styles for a dress that's sure to impress!

- Highlight your high points. Accentuate a small waist with belts or ties, show off shapely legs with a high split, or dare to bare in a dress with a low cut back. If wearing a dress with a low back, a bra converter is an easy way to adapt your bra.
- Higher necklines can still look great and there are many different styles to choose from. Experiment with different styles, or fabrics, for an up-to-the-minute look, select styles with vintage beading or sequins.
- For those with smaller busts, the latest asymmetrical styles are perfect to wear with a self supporting breast form.
- If you're self conscious about wearing a dress with a slightly lower neckline, a fashionable corsage is a great way to disguise scarring and adds a touch of colour to your outfit.
- A dress with chiffon detailing around the neckline is a perfect way to achieve a strappy look that also conceals high scarring.

Keep it in place!

If you feel self conscious about wearing a breast form and spend all night constantly checking that everything is still in the right place, the following suggestions will leave you confident enough to dance the night away!

- Consider trying a self adhesive breast form, for example the Amoena Contact. This type of breast form adheres directly to the body and therefore takes away any anxiety you may feel about your breast form moving or slipping out of place.
- A mastectomy bra has a pocket sewn into the cup to hold your breast form securely in place. The pocket is a snug fit to ensure your breast form cannot move or slip out of position. Amoena's bras also have an elasticated edge to the cup so that they hug the chest wall securely. Why not try a bra from our Pia range, which combines beautiful lace with a choice of three colour options and has briefs to match?
- Alternatively, if you need to wear a bra with thinner straps, adapting a bra is easy with Amoena sew-in pockets. These cotton flaps are designed to fit the cup of the bra perfectly and form a pocket to hold your breast form securely in

place. Just make sure the bra you choose is firm enough to support the weight of your breast form.

Choosing a strappy dress

Mastectomy bras, and in particular those for larger bust sizes, often have wider straps to provide adequate support for your breast form. If you want to wear a strappy dress, try the following:

- A Priform, which is a temporary fabric breast form, is ideal for larger busts and can be sewn into a bra with thin or clear straps. Although it won't feel as realistic as a silicone breast form, it will give you a good shape and because it is feather light it can even be sewn or pinned directly into the dress.
- Consider wearing a self supporting breast form, such as the Amoena Plus System. Held in place with skin supports which adhere to the body, self supporting breast forms do not require the same amount of support as traditional breast forms. They can even be worn without a bra if you are small busted.

Balancing Act

If you want to choose a tight fitting style, it is essential that your bra and breast form are the correct fit, to ensure you look completely balanced. To check whether your bra and breast form fit you correctly follow this simple procedure:

- Put on your bra and breast form and take a good look in the mirror. Does your breast form and your natural breast fill the cups of the bra perfectly?
- If the cup is puckering in the nipple area, your bra may be too big. If, however your breast form or part of your natural breast can be seen outside the bra cup, your bra may be too small.
- Next put on a tight fitting, preferably light coloured tee shirt. Pull the fabric tight around you – do your breasts look completely even? If your bra and breast form fit you correctly there shouldn't be any difference in size, shape or position.
- If you would like further advice on choosing the correct bra and breast form, please call the Amoena helpline for advice: freephone 0800 0726636. Lines are open from 9am-5pm Monday to Friday.

Disguising a lymphoedema sleeve

If following your surgery you suffer from lymphoedema and need to wear a sleeve to keep the condition under control, you may be self conscious about wearing sleeveless dresses. However, dresses with sleeves aren't always an option as they are often too restrictive. Use the following suggestions for the latest hot looks, that still keep you feeling cool!

- This season's essential look – flowy batwing and georgette sleeves are perfect for hiding a slightly swollen arm or lymphoedema sleeve, but are still loose enough to keep you cool.
- Alternatively, choose a dress or matching jacket with chiffon sleeves – just make sure the sleeves are loose enough not to restrict movement.
- Those who dare to bare will love this season's hottest look – a sheer chiffon blouse, teamed with a well cut bra (for example Ariane) which will hide your breast form perfectly. For a more modest look, a silky camisole will look just as effective.
- Accessorise an existing outfit with an elegant organza wrap or pashmina.

- Glam it up with plenty of jewellery! Sparkly bangles are a great way to disguise your sleeve, just make sure the jewellery you choose isn't too heavy as it will put added pressure on your arm.

Getting the right fit

So you've found the perfect dress, it hides your scar, is just the right colour, but it gapes under the arm or is miles too long – so it's not suitable right? Wrong! It always pays to ask an assistant whether a dress can be altered or adapted.

Many styles can be easily adapted and some possible alterations include: shortening the length; shortening straps (if the dress is too low); adding darts at the neckline, waist line or under the arm.

Although the service offered will vary from store to store, it is worth enquiring as some will offer to make minor alterations free of charge.

If the store doesn't provide its own tailoring service, you should be able to find this type of service locally. Look in the Yellow Pages under "Dressmakers" or "Tailors-Repairs & Alterations". Alternatively, some dry-cleaners will also provide an alteration service.

Styles to flatter the fuller figure

Following some treatments for breast cancer, it is quite common to put on weight, particularly around the tummy area. To show your figure to its best advantage and disguise common problem areas, try the following:

- Avoid clingy styles or fabrics, instead choose simple shapes and good quality fabrics for the best fit.
- Cut is very important. Look for shaped or tailored dresses rather than baggy clothes.
- Separates are extremely versatile as you can mix and match and introduce layering. Jackets and long shirts worn over a tighter fitting top can be very flattering. For an up-to-the-minute look, choose velvet or leather trousers with a sequin or beaded top.
- Don't worry about the size of dress you wear just as long as the style you choose fits and flatters your figure. Remember, different styles and different manufacturer's clothing vary in size and fit, so it is always worth trying a dress in a different size.

Getting the right help & advice

We don't think twice about asking for advice when buying a car, kitchen appliance or even make-up, so why not ask for advice when we shop for clothes? Many shops, particularly large department stores will be able to offer you help and advice, but you will need to ask, as this type of service isn't always advertised.

- *Fashion Advice:* Find out if your local store has a fashion advisor who will be able to help you choose clothes to suit your own particular requirements. Not only does this help to take the stress out of shopping, it also gives you the chance to receive advice on the latest styles and the types of clothes that will suit you.
- John Lewis are able to offer a free fashion advisory service, by appointment at most of their stores. Fashion consultations will usually take approximately half an hour and a John Lewis advisor will first discuss your requirements and any

specific problems you have before helping you to build a look, including finding shoes and accessories to match your outfit, if required.

- *Personal Shopping:* Although not all stores offer a fashion advisory service, more and more are now offering a personal shopping service to help you choose anything from party clothes to Christmas presents. Debenhams now offer a personal shopping service in many of their larger stores.

In Contact

Our letters in this issue focus on the support our readers have received from friends, family, breast cancer organisations and from the letters featured in our magazine.

Do you have a story you'd like to share or some words of encouragement for other readers? Send your letters or photographs for inclusion in AMOENA Life to: Rhoda White, Editor, AMOENA (UK) Ltd, FREEPOST, Eastleigh, Hampshire, SO53 4BJ or e-mail: agrwhw@amoena.com

The worst of times found me the best of friends

I had a lumpectomy last July, then much to my horror had to have a mastectomy in the September. Like your other readers I was very frightened, thinking it was the end of the world. I am very fortunate to have a supportive husband and friends who rallied round. In the depths of despair something good came out of it. I made friends with another lady in the same ward. After leaving hospital if either of us had a bad day we would comfort each other. I have just come back from the hospital with her after her mammogram as it has been almost a year. She is coming with me at the end of the month. In October we are both going to Cyprus for a two week holiday. Has anyone else found friendship at such a bad time?

Jo C

New confidence with Classic Contact

After reading about your Classic Contact in Inform, I phoned my breast care nurse and asked if I could try one. I am a small busted person and I have had my new Classic Contact for three weeks now and I feel confident about the way I look and feel. It's as if it is part of me, so light you forget it's on and my chest is not sore when I take it off. I feel great and it has changed my life – it's everything the magazine says it is and more.

My grateful thanks.

Jacqueline W

Drawn together by our experience

I would like to say thank you for your publication. I have only recently had a mastectomy and issue 11 arrived on my doorstep last week. It was so enlightening, women nationwide drawn together by their experiences. I have had so many mixed emotions since my operation – relief that I didn't need any therapy afterwards followed by the "why me and not the lady next door?", and "if onlys". Reading your magazine has given me more insight into the disease than any doctor, no disrespect, but the real people are the women who have been through this ordeal themselves.

Like your reader who said her husband kissed her scar, my partner has done the same thing and he is brilliant. He calls me above the waist as "lost and found"! May I take this opportunity to thank all your readers who, albeit unknowingly, have taken me to their hearts.

J M

Beautiful baby a bonus

I was diagnosed as having breast cancer at 30 years of age. I was single, lived at

home and the year before had broken up from a relationship. I went on to have a full mastectomy, radiotherapy, chemo-therapy and tamoxifen. A year after finishing chemo, I started going out with someone I had met at work and two years after that we were married on the understanding that following my chemo I would have little chance of conceiving. Consequently it came as quite a shock to find that after our first anniversary (whilst I was still taking tamoxifen) I was expecting a baby. After numerous talks to the doctors and consultants about any possible risks there may be, I went on to have a beautiful baby daughter. I was unfortunately unable to breast feed, not I might add because I only had one breast, but because I was still taking the tamoxifen and had continued to do so throughout my pregnancy.

Jacqui B

Romance blossomed after surgery

I was very encouraged by the letters in your magazine and would like to share my story with you. My husband died in May '97 and in the November I went for my first mammogram which showed cancerous changes in my right breast. There followed two fine wire localisations and when a mammogram and biopsy in December '99 showed further changes I was advised to have a mastectomy and on Valentines Day 2000 my right breast was removed. During this time I received much prayerful support from my friends and particularly from Tony who had been a very special friend to both Keith and myself since he had started to attend our church after the death of his wife Pearl.

The morning of my mastectomy Tony was there with a beautiful bouquet of flowers for Valentine's Day and was by my bedside when I came back from surgery. I was very blessed and on 25th February I received the news that the surgery had removed the cancer completely. On my 55th birthday last June Tony proposed and we were married on 5th May this year in our Parish Church. I hope this letter will illustrate that there can be life after cancer.

Shirley V

Haven Trust – a real sanctuary

I had breast cancer diagnosed in late 1998 and had chemotherapy and radiotherapy in 1999. The only thing I found traumatic about this was losing my hair but it came back darker and thicker.

I joined our local breast cancer group during this time and found the friendship and help from other members was wonderful. I have also been going to the Haven Trust in Fulham where any lady who has had breast cancer may go. The people there are very friendly and willing to give their time to talk and listen to any queries you may have.

They also have all sorts of alternative treatments (which are free). I have seen a nutritionist which was most useful and have also had a session of Reiki, which was most calming and left me with a wonderful feeling and I shall be going back for more. I also have reflexology from a friend which is very relaxing.

I really enjoy reading your magazine and find the comments from other sufferers most encouraging. I hope my comments will be helpful to other readers.

Elizabeth T

Thanks for the support

Thanks for your magazine, I really look forward to receiving it - it's like an old friend dropping in. It really does help to buck me up when I read it, because so many of the items are things I can relate to. It also makes me realise how stoic some women are - they go on as if nothing has happened - all credit to them. This helps me to realise that there is life after breast cancer and that it's up to me to make sure that I have one.

I would also like to say thank you to the gentleman that wrote in. I am sure there are many more of these lovely men who love and support their wives. I know mine does, he's lovely and I could not have got through my trauma without him. The trouble is, I don't often tell him this, but high or low, whatever my mood, he is always there supporting and loving me as he has through 35 years of marriage.

Mrs B G

Never give up

I was diagnosed with breast cancer in November 2000, two weeks before we were due to go to Australia. I found the lump, telephoned my GP and was referred to Northwick Park Hospital all within two weeks. I was told to go for a mammogram and to come back three days later for the results. When my partner and I went to see the oncologist, he said to me "I am sorry it is not good news, it is cancer". I asked how big the cancer was and he told me it was 6cm and I thought they would do a lumpectomy, but he said "no I am afraid it will have to be a mastectomy". The operation was to take place two weeks later and we then had to tell all the family that we were not going to Australia because I had cancer. The hardest part was telling the children, but to our amazement they took it really well.

After the operation I was in hospital for 5 days and I was forced to look at the scar by one female doctor, who told me if I did not look at the scar, I would not be able to go home. When I looked at my scar I felt very ugly and thought my partner may never want to look at my body again. How wrong I was to think of him like that. My partner has given me so much courage and support, I don't think I would have coped without him.

I eventually had chemotherapy and radiotherapy and have been told that I am now in remission. I have gone back to work after having 6 months off and feel great – since having cancer I now enjoy my life and want to make the most of it. Although I lost all my hair, my finger nails went black and my face became blotchy, I kept thinking positively and never gave up. I want to say to anyone out there, never give up, try to look on the bright side, enjoy what you have around you and make the most of it by living your life to the full.

The hospital I attended for my radiotherapy (Mount Vernon Hospital) also has a Linda Jackson Centre for cancer patients and I have had four sessions of aromatherapy massage, counselling and relaxation classes, all for free. They also advised me on how to apply for holiday insurance and we are off to Florida with the children in August.

I wonder if any one can tell me how I can get critical illness cover, I have tried various insurance companies and no one seems to want to insure me. They all tell me I have

to wait 5 years before I can apply. Any information would be much appreciated.

Pushpa V

Mind and Body

Have yourself a very healthy Christmas

A lavish Christmas meal is central to the festivities, it can also be surprisingly good for you!

The traditional turkey dinner with all the trimmings...

Turkey: Probably the most popular choice for a traditional Christmas dinner, this low fat meat is high in protein, B vitamins and selenium. Select the darker leg meat as this contains twice as much iron as the lighter breast meat and three times as much zinc, which is important for a healthy immune system.

Cranberry Sauce: They not only taste great, but cranberries have been valued for centuries for their nutritious and medicinal qualities. Packed with antioxidants including vitamin C, cranberries are also beneficial in helping to prevent bladder infections.

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Veg out! Rather than pile your plate with too much turkey and stuffing, fill up on tasty vegetables for a healthy alternative. Vegetables are full of antioxidants and some doctors and nutritionists believe that those who eat more antioxidant-rich foods as part of a healthy, well-balanced diet are less prone to heart disease and some types of cancer. Antioxidants help to prevent the body's cells from being damaged by oxygen particles called free radicals. The major antioxidants from food that help with our defence system are vitamins E and C, several carotene, some flavonoids and the mineral selenium. All vegetables are good for you, particularly those green, orange and red in colour. Choose these traditional Christmas vegetables:

Brussels Sprouts & Broccoli: Rich in many nutrients and high in antioxidants, broccoli and brussels sprouts contain beta-carotenes and vitamins C and E. They also contain chemicals thought to discourage cancer.

Carrots: Orange coloured vegetables are rich sources of the antioxidant beta-carotene and contain vitamins C and E. Studies have shown that people who eat more foods rich in carotenes have a lower risk of heart disease, strokes and some cancers.

Sweet Potatoes: Unrelated to the ordinary spud, sweet potatoes contain far more vitamins and are another good source of antioxidant vitamins C and E. The orange fleshed variety is especially rich in beta-carotene.

Festive goodies

Don't feel guilty about over-indulging this Christmas, just choose festive fayre that is actually good for you!

Mulled Wine: An alternative to the traditional wassail, mulled wine makes a great drink on a cold winter's evening. Although excess alcohol consumption has been linked as a contributing factor to breast cancer, studies have also shown that drinking two glasses of red wine a day could cut your risk of heart disease by as much as a

quarter. The antioxidants in wine help mop up harmful chemicals while also reducing high blood pressure and making the blood less likely to clot. Try to select an organic wine if possible and don't get too carried away!

Grape Juice: For those who prefer a non-alcoholic drink, substitute red wine with grape juice. Red grape juice contains antioxidant compounds on a similar level to red wine, as well as vitamin C, another antioxidant.

Fruit and nutty!

For a healthy snack, when everyone else is munching on crisps and chocolate, why not make the most of the nuts and fruits that are around at this time of year?

Nuts: Roasted chestnuts are the perfect Christmas tradition, are high in complex carbohydrates and have less fat and calories than most other nuts thanks to their high water content. A typical portion will give you a third of your recommended daily intake of vitamin E and a quarter of vitamin B6. Alternatively try brazil nuts which contain selenium which as well as being an antioxidant will also stimulate your immune system and has been shown to help reduce depression.

Nectarines and Satsumas: Like all citrus fruits, tangerines provide an excellent source of vitamin C which is essential for a healthy immune system.

Fresh Dates and Figs: Fresh dates are high in vitamin C with 100g providing almost a third of the recommended daily intake, whilst the dried variety are rich in potassium. Early research has also suggested that fresh figs may have some cancer-discouraging action and are also a good source of beta-carotene. And, don't forget they also taste delicious!

Magical Mistletoe

Could it help cure cancer?

Think of the word mistletoe and chances are, you're imagining couples young and old stealing a quick kiss beneath it. So, it may come as a surprise to learn that, since the start of the twentieth century, this highly toxic plant has been used by specialist physicians as a cancer fighting treatment.

First popularised in 1912 by European doctors who practiced in anthroposophic medicine, mistletoe is now widely used in Germany and Switzerland by cancer patients who choose to use this therapy alongside more orthodox treatments such as chemotherapy.

Mistletoe treatment is prescribed by anthroposophical doctors in the form of injections, usually given twice a week for at least three months. Clinical trials in Europe suggest that extracts of mistletoe seem to slow down the growth of cancerous tumours by attacking the cancer in two ways. Firstly by stimulating the immune system, so that it releases certain chemicals that attack the tumour. Secondly, by improving DNA repair and thus the ability for the white blood cells to recognise and remove malignancy.

Mistletoe therapy is also thought to act as an anti-depressant contributing to a patients well-being and quality of life.

Although mistletoe injections can cause the area to become inflamed and may cause nausea and abdominal pain, the side effects of mistletoe therapies are minimal. To date there is no other evidence of toxic effects from mistletoe preparations when used as directed, however, under no circumstance should mistletoe be eaten as it is highly toxic and can cause seizures and in severe cases death.

In Britain, mistletoe therapy is more commonly known by the name Iscador. However, it is still relatively unheard of in this country as there are only 50 anthroposophical doctors in Britain, compared with 1,000 in Europe. Many British practitioners work within the NHS so treatment is free, the remainder have private practices.

Park Attwood in Bewdley, Worcestershire is one of the clinics that is able to provide mistletoe therapy and is staffed by conventionally trained doctors who believe that patients can benefit from anthroposophical treatments and therapies, when used alongside orthodox medicine.

Anthroposophical practitioners advise that mistletoe treatment should be part of an overall package which looks at many factors which can help physical and spiritual well-being, from meditation to healthy eating, plus treatment advised by your cancer specialist.

Clinical trials on mistletoe treatments are still sparse and rather inconclusive because this is still practiced by few. However, if you would like to find out more information speak to your cancer specialist or contact the organisations listed below.

For a list of anthroposophical doctors, contact the Anthroposophical Medical Trust, c/o Park Attwood Clinic, Trimpley, Bewdley, Worcestershire, DY12 1RE tel: 01299 861561. The Bristol Cancer Help Centre will also be able to talk to you about this treatment. Tel: 0117 980 9500.