


DONNA

OCTOBER 2021

A portrait of Donna McHarg, a woman with short blonde hair, smiling and resting her chin on her hand. She is wearing a pink button-down shirt, a gold ring, and a silver charm bracelet. The background is dark grey.

“Trust your instincts when it comes to your body and get regular mammograms and female health check-ups”
-Donna McHarg

Donna McHarg - My story

Diagnosed with stage 1 cancer and treated at Mediclinic Airport Road Hospital

When did you find out you had breast cancer?

I was diagnosed with breast cancer in September 2020, biopsy results confirmed the diagnosis, and I was told on 28 September 2020.

How did you find out you had breast cancer?

I had pains in my left breast for a couple of months on and off. I went to get it checked out with my gynaecologist and was referred for a mammogram and ultrasound. The cancerous tumour was found in the right breast not the left.

What did you go through emotionally?

There were a lot of emotions. Initially I was quite annoyed that cancer had the audacity to enter my body. It was also very scary at times, your whole world and everything that is important to you is thrown upside down, your plans for the future become very uncertain. In addition, being diagnosed with cancer during a global pandemic was intense as it had many people questioning their mortality with the Covid-19 virus taking millions of lives.

There was the additional worry of my immune system being weakened by treatment and trying to not get the Covid virus. It was a worrying time.

It was also tough from a family perspective not being able to have our daughters, grandchildren and other close family members physically here to support us. It was difficult having very limited physical contact with family and friends.

What did your treatment plan include?

My treatment plan was quite conventional. I had surgery - a lumpectomy to remove the tumour and some lymph nodes on 4 October. No cancer was found in the lymph nodes which was excellent news. I then started chemotherapy on 16 November. It was every three weeks for four sessions and my final chemotherapy was on 18 January 2021. That was quickly followed by 18 sessions on consecutive days (Sunday to Thursday) of radiotherapy starting on 14 February. I am now on hormone therapy and will be for a significant time to come.



How did you cope with the treatment?

I feel that I coped well with the surgery and the early stages of chemotherapy and losing my hair, although that was a traumatic time. It was more traumatic I think waiting for my hair to fall out and then it actually starting to shed everywhere. Watching my husband pick clumps of it up off the floor was upsetting for him and me. Once it was all shaved off it felt like one less thing to worry about.

The last two chemotherapy treatments were tough. My body wouldn't do what my brain was telling it to and

I foolishly thought I could try to carry on as normally as possible, but it takes its toll on you physically and mentally.

Radiotherapy was required after my chemotherapy, I really struggled with this emotionally, which I was a little surprised at, maybe things were really catching up with me. I dreaded the daily sessions and was so glad when it was over. I am now on hormone therapy. It has its challenges, but ultimately, I know that having had all these treatments my reoccurrence rate is lower. I'm hoping to be around for a long while.



How was your treatment with Mediclinic and your doctor?

My treatment throughout my breast cancer journey was excellent. All the doctors and staff at Mediclinic who I interacted with made me feel so supported as a person and not just as a patient. It is a very caring and supportive hospital and especially the oncology unit and staff.

The timeframe of my treatment was superb, all my appointments with the consultants and surgeon were scheduled

promptly. My husband and I felt this was important, to be informed, to know the treatment options available to me and to be able to move quickly to remove the cancer from my body. Having solutions available and accessible to you as early as possible is important. This really made the early part of the diagnosis and treatment more bearable.

What motivated you?

My husband, our children and grandchildren motivated me, my love of life and wanting to do more with my life and help others

were great motivators. I really never thought this could happen to me, I am a healthy and active woman with no history of breast cancer in my family. I was determined to not let it rule my life, even though it changed my perspective on a lot of things.

I wrote a journal throughout my cancer treatment. I decided during my treatment to start turning my journal into a book and this gave me something to focus on. I wanted to write my story to help others going through the same thing. It is called 'A little Bit of Me' and is a frank and honest account of my breast cancer journey. I published it on Amazon.com at the end of July, which was very exciting and cathartic as well.



What advice would you give to people reading your story?

My advice for all women young and old is to check your breasts regularly, get to know them well so that you can identify any changes, even small ones. Trust your instincts when it comes to your body and get regular mammograms and female health check-ups.

For those starting or going through breast cancer treatment who might be reading this, I would suggest you find some form of alternative therapy that works for you. I kept a journal throughout my cancer. Writing it down helped me be myself, I could be honest about my

thoughts and feelings, there was no expectation on me. I also tried to stay active and meditated and did breathing exercises daily, just a few minutes a day, which helped me stay grounded. Trying new things to help you deal with the cancer, the treatment and side effects can help the coping and healing process. There is no right or wrong, just do what works for you.

Anything else you wish to add?

I just want to thank my amazing husband and all my fabulous family, friends, work colleagues and the staff at Mediclinic who have supported me so much during this last year.



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Cancer will affect one woman in seven, it's real, it's scary, but detected early you can beat it and live a full and happy life.