

# Advice on Minimizing Health Risks From a Breast Cancer Survivor

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I recently had the pleasure of sitting down to chat with my good friend Theresa Carriere. Theresa is a fitness instructor, avid runner, wife and mother of four. At 43, she decided to have her first mammogram. She thought it would give her a starting point to managing her health. However, it turned out to be something much, much more. This early screening changed Theresa's life forever as it revealed that she had stage two breast cancer.

October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month and, as a breast cancer survivor, Theresa urges women to educate themselves on the precautions they can take to minimize their risk. According to the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation, one third of breast cancer cases are preventable. While there are many uncontrollable factors that increase your risk of breast cancer -- such as age, family history, and medical history -- there are also factors you can and should control. You can control your weight and body fat percentage. You can take control of your diet and increase your physical activity. You can decrease sedentary time and avoid smoking. But, Theresa adds, a lot of recommendations don't come with actionable advice. That's why she and I worked together to come up with practical advice for reducing the controllable breast cancer risk factors.

**Minimize Your Risk:**

- **Maintain a healthy waist size and body fat percentage:** We often hear 'overweight' and 'high body fat', but what do these terms truly mean? You should strive to keep your waistline less than 35 inches and, for women between the age of 20 and 60, a 21-35% body fat is recommended. An even better metric is the 'waist-hip' ratio because it measures belly fat which is an indicator of health status. Measure your waist in inches at the smallest part. Then, measure your hips in inches at their widest and divide the waist measurement by your hip measurement. Try to keep that score less than 0.8 inches.
  - **Eat a healthy diet:** Avoid a diet that is high in animal fats (including dairy fat in cheese, milk, ice cream, and red and processed meats). Be sure to eat 7 to 10 servings of fruits and vegetables daily in a wide array of colours to maximize the different vitamins and nutrients your body gets. Lean protein and plant protein alternatives are a great source of energy and help to strengthen and repair muscle tissue after exercise. Lastly, try to eliminate processed meats and foods whenever possible.
  - **Get active and reduce sedentary time:** Participating in 30 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous aerobic activity at a time, or about 2.5 hours per week, on a regular basis can lower your risk of breast cancer by as much as 25-30 percent. Your routine should combine cardio AND strength training. (Read more below to find out the type workouts Theresa has built into her routine.) As you become more active you'll find it has a very positive influence on other healthy behaviors such as eating healthier, quitting or avoiding smoking and managing body weight.
  - **Modify/limit alcohol consumption to less than three to four servings per week.**
  - **Avoid smoking**
  - **Manage stress and anxiety:** a healthy lifestyle with a balanced diet and exercise can help manage stress and anxiety. It also helps build immunity and strengthens the body's protection against illness and disease.
- It's important to speak with your doctor about your possible risk factors for developing breast cancer so that he or she has an accurate understanding and can help you develop a proactive plan and recommend the best approach to breast cancer screenings. Remember, every woman is different.

## **Theresa's story -- The recovery:**

"Recovery begins the moment after you've been diagnosed," says Theresa.

After her diagnosis, Theresa recognized for the first time in her life that she wasn't in control of her own wellbeing. This immediately motivated her to regain the control she knew would be necessary to defeat her cancer.

Theresa's recovery centred on improving an already 'clean' diet along with controlling her anxiety, stress and fatigue with exercise. She found that running on her own provided an opportunity to mentally recharge, while taking her favourite group exercise classes like CXworx or indoor cycling provided her with much needed social support. Knowing she had some measure of control over her life gave Theresa a sense she was actively participating in her own treatment and recovery rather than leaving it in the hands of the medical system. According to Theresa, this is what gave her comfort and the power to fight.

During her recovery, Theresa gravitated toward weight training, something she hadn't done for quite some time. She found lifting weights and building strength extremely empowering. Theresa would take this newfound strength and internalize it, helping her on her road to recovery. "Being normal again was my saving grace. I would run and do a lot of self-talk. I'd tell myself: one step at a time and you'll get through this".

### **The ONERun:**

After winning her battle, Theresa realized she needed to demonstrate to others that they too could take control of their health and their lives. She showed that cancer can't stop you if you set your mind to doing something, no matter how difficult it may appear at the outset. In 2010, Theresa and her friends came up with the idea of ONERUN. The idea was simple -- one survivor, 100 kilometers, one day. The run was a metaphor for Theresa's cancer-fighting journey -- it's not easy, but it's doable. To date, Theresa has run this 100 kilometre ONERUN three times and has raised over \$500,000.00. ([www.onerun.ca](http://www.onerun.ca))

## **Final thoughts from Theresa**

When you're fighting cancer, you most likely won't be able to do everything you did before -- at least not right away. It's important to be patient with yourself and your body. That's why recovery is a process.

Fighting cancer can teach you things about yourself. Theresa gained a new appreciation and understanding of her body and her health. Being diagnosed with breast cancer put things into perspective. She learned not to sweat the small things and how important it is to live life to its fullest. Most importantly, she learned to embrace help from family, friends and the health care system. Although it was uncomfortable at first, Theresa realized she didn't have to fight cancer alone.