

Facing the fear of breast cancer recurrence

When Laurie Brunner found a lump in her breast just before Thanksgiving in 2018, it was the beginning of one of the most difficult periods of her life. Although treatment put her cancer into remission, she found herself dealing with an emotional toll that affects many survivors of early-stage breast cancer: the fear of it coming back.

Photos: Brent Stirton, Getty Images for Novartis

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Laurie carves Halloween pumpkins with her family. Laurie was diagnosed with stage II breast cancer in December 2018. Only a few weeks later, she underwent surgery followed by eight rounds of chemotherapy.

One of my first concerns was how to tell my son who was only 7 at the time,” Laurie says. “I ended up saying they found some bad cells in my body that needed to come out, and that the medicine would make me tired and make my hair fall out. He also helped to shave my head — we gave him the clippers and he did a good chunk of that.



Laurie at home on her porch. In 2019, Laurie was told by her oncologist that her cancer was in remission but that there was a 20% risk of it coming back. Approximately one-third of those diagnosed with stage II and more than half of those diagnosed with stage III HR+/HER2- early breast cancer experience cancer recurrence.

I felt that anxiety every day. I became attuned to every sensation in my body. It was the first thing that came to mind if I felt some random pain. I've stopped thinking about it every day, but it's still easy for something to throw me right back.



Laurie (center) with friends who supported her through cancer treatment, including shaving their heads in solidarity. During this time, a friend told her about a clinical trial of a Novartis treatment for patients with early breast cancer. After going through screening, she entered the trial in October 2019 at Mass General Cancer Center in Boston.

I did it for me,” she says. “I was only 48. I had a small child. And I was determined to live. But I also did it to advance the science and help others: so many people supported me, and I felt a responsibility to help lead the way for those who come after me. I’m really proud of that.



Laurie stands next to the Charles River in Boston.

I'm not the same person that I was. Not mentally, not emotionally, not physically. Until earlier this year, when I took a leave of absence from work, I never had time to just heal and process what had happened to me. But I feel hopeful. I have many more years of life left. I can't know if or when there will be recurrence, but I know I survived breast cancer once and could do it again. I know I'm capable of getting through that.



Tanya Taran, global program head for breast cancer at Novartis. In 2023, we reported the results of the clinical trial in which Laurie participated. They showed that a Novartis medicine significantly reduced risk of recurrence by 25% across a broad population of patients with early breast cancer. **(Photo:** Bjoern Myhre, Novartis)

We have this great responsibility to design studies that improve patients' chance to avoid the recurrence of their cancer but also balance it with their quality of life.

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List of links present in page

1. <https://prod1.novartis.com/stories/facing-fear-breast-cancer-recurrence>
2. <https://prod1.novartis.com/tags/category/patient-perspectives>
3. <https://prod1.novartis.com/about/therapeutic-areas/oncology>