

Living the New Normal

By Erin Pennell

Sitting around with some friends one January evening, I remember asking myself “What is wrong with my arms?” They felt heavy and were aching a lot. I wondered what was wrong as I hadn’t done anything different that day to account for the hurt I was feeling. There were no bruises or cuts, no obvious swelling and it was affecting both of my arms.

The symptoms continued. A few weeks later I was at one of many appointments at the Cancer Centre for treatment of my second bout of breast cancer in less than a year. I met Martina Reddick, a friend from my home town who also just

happened to be the lymphedema nurse! In the course of our conversation, I told her my symptoms. She told me it sounded like I had lymphedema. An assessment confirmed the diagnosis.

I was stunned, even though it all made sense. Yes I had been “informed” about (given information) about lymphedema each time, but with the shock of the diagnoses, the wealth of information given and the decisions to be made, I guess it just didn’t get stored in my “chemo brain”! On top of that I am a nurse! I should

have known! But at this point in my life I was primarily a young woman battling breast cancer and all that goes with it (numerous appointments, tests, biopsies, surgeries, chemo, radiation etc.) I wasn’t



Erin Pennell is a survivor of bilateral breast cancer (both in 2007). Like many breast cancer survivors, she lives with the after effects like lymphedema, fatigue, and fear of recurrence. Being a member of a support group helps her deal with these issues. Amazing family, friends, and medical support have made the journey easier for her. Erin is a nurse currently working in cancer care, where she hopes her personal experience may bring another aspect to those living and dealing with cancer.



a nurse, I was a woman, I was a patient, I was (and thankfully, still am) a survivor!

In the four years since these symptoms first presented, my lymphedema has progressed from mild to moderate. Swelling is now obvious. The heaviness and aching come and go. Adjustments have been necessary. My husband willingly does many chores that were traditionally mine. I don’t miss vacuuming too much though! I’ve

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learned to do things differently. I’ve learned that I can’t do some things the way I used to, that I need to pace myself, take breaks and let others help—even when I really want to do it myself. I’ve learned to let go of some things, realizing that it won’t be the end of the world if there’s some dust on the furniture. I’m still trying to adjust to the sleeves and gloves. Finding what works for me is a work in progress—custom garments are on the way any day now. I cook, do some cleaning, occasionally iron a few things, spend time in my “Garden of Erin” created

by my husband, occasionally hang clothes on the line (love it), work and of course, play!

I accept every opportunity to learn as much as I can about living with breast cancer and with lymphedema. I participate in support groups for both. I read and ask questions and avail myself of the wealth of knowledge and services of our fabulous lymphedema nurses and certified lymphedema therapist. We are so fortunate to have them here. Whenever possible, I attend workshops and conferences that address these issues. “Knowledge is power.”

As a nurse, helping and caring is part of who I am. I am blessed that I can help a “sister” understand what is happening to her—not only from personal experience but also from a medical perspective. It is always so rewarding to see the look in someone’s eyes that tells you they grasp what you are telling them, and mostly to give them hope that life can go on. After all, “what are we in this world for if not to make it easier for each other.”

While there is no cure for lymphedema, it is a condition that can be managed. I must do my part in trying to maintain “lymph health” and prevent flare-ups or worsening. As with the breast cancer journey, I have to do what works best for me. This is an ongoing process. In the meantime, I am living my life and doing my best to enjoy life as much as I can—living the new normal. **LP**