

ASK THE EXPERT

> Surgical Oncologist
with a heart ♥

Dr. Lisa Curcio,

a Surgical Oncologist specializing in Breast Care (and a breast cancer survivor herself) brings a personal understanding and compassion to her work with cancer patients. Currently, she is the only female Surgical Oncologist in South Orange County and has devoted her life's work to the education, prevention, and treatment of breast cancer. She says her heart lead her to working with patients with cancer.



Making a Difference in the lives of her cancer patients, One Person at a time

When it comes to her work, she is very passionate and expresses excitement about advancements in her field, such as selective lymph node biopsies and genomics. She also talks about her profession and her personal health philosophies as well as her family and her hobbies. Needless to say, her patients are in good hands.

Q&A WITH EXPERT
DR. LISA CURCIO

> advancements

How has Surgical Oncology advanced the last few years? What advancements do we currently have that we didn't have 5 years ago?

The biggest advances in the field of surgical oncology are being able to treat cancers effectively in less invasive ways such as laparoscopic colectomy in colon cancer. Specifically a major advancement in breast cancer surgery is that we are now able to perform selective lymph node biopsies on patients with invasive breast cancer. This has spared thousands of women the complications of near total lymph node removal. Also, the ability to perform lumpectomies on the majority of breast cancer patients—where 30 years ago the only option was mastectomy—has changed the surgical management of breast cancer and has improved the quality of life for many women.

Where do you see Surgical Oncology going in the upcoming decade? What advances do you foresee? What is currently in the works?

The most exciting advance I have seen is in the field of genetics. A better understanding of the genetic cellular changes that leads to cancer has given us improved treatment modalities. The understanding of these genetic changes now allows us to customize cancer treatment and more carefully select tumors that will need more treatment, as well as those tumors that may need very little treatment after surgery. This is called genomics and is a significant advancement in the breast cancer care that every woman should consider with early stage breast cancer.

Also on the horizon, there may be even less invasive ways to treat breast cancer, for instance, by treating the tumor with a device similar to what we use for biopsies, we may be able to freeze or use radiofrequency waves to kill tumors and never have to remove them. There is currently a clinical trial undertaking the freezing of cancerous tumors as definitive treatment.

> profession

What attracted you to specialize in Surgical Oncology?

My grandfather died of pancreatic cancer at 53 when I was in grade school. The diagnostic and treatment options were so poor at that time, I made a commitment to make a difference in the treatment of cancer patients in the future. The field of surgical oncology was just evolving when I was in my residency and I had tremendous mentors who help direct me in that path and stay true to my dream.

No particular field of oncology is better than the other and we all work hand in hand. As a surgical oncologist, I cannot be effective without my medical and radiation oncology colleagues. The care of a cancer patient truly requires a community of specialized and dedicated oncology professionals with the primary goal of caring for the patient as a whole! The surgical oncologist is the person who does the cancer surgery, but unlike a general surgeon, the surgical oncologist has specialized training that gives them significant knowledge about the other fields. A surgical oncologist is someone who has done additional training above their general surgery training to be most effective in the surgical treatment of cancers. The medical oncologist is the physician who makes recommendations and implements chemotherapy and endocrine therapy for various cancers. Lastly, the radiation oncologist is the physician who delivers radiation treatments for

various cancers. It is important for the patient that all medical specialties are communicating and have a coordinated treatment plan for the patient.

What do you feel differentiates your practice and your work?

I think that my training has given me a tremendous background for my practice. Also, being a woman and having had breast cancer offers me a unique perspective that most providers cannot offer. This is not just my work; the care of breast cancer patients is truly my passion and I believe that is reflected in the type of individualized care I offer each one of my patients. Lastly, I feel that I am an advocate for my patients as I can relate not only to their medical needs, but also to their emotional health and overall well-being.

Do you promote surgery as the first solution?

Surgery is not always the first treatment and those recommendations are individualized with the patient and their physicians depending on tumor characteristics and individual patient characteristics.

> personal philosophy

What advice would you give to women who struggle with Breast Cancer?

The best advice I can give patients is that they are not alone. The biggest joy a breast cancer patient has is to align themselves to a team of doctors who are working together on their behalf. I advise everyone not be concerned with "offending" their physicians by seeking a 2nd opinion. You must find the team of physicians that you feel is right for you. Lastly, no matter what treatment that you will need to undergo, you will find the strength and ability to do things you never thought possible in your cancer treatment. Surprisingly, in the end, somehow, somehow, you will come out of all of this a better and stronger person. This statement is truly how I feel, not only as a breast cancer specialist, but also as a breast cancer survivor.

How do you stay passionate about your work? What is your favorite aspect of what you do? What continues to inspire and motivate you?

The passion for what I do lies in the ability to make a difference in people's lives, one person at a time, and I feel very privileged to be able to do that each and every day. The best part of what I do is the people that I take care of—getting to know them and understanding them, their family and the journey that got them to where they are today. All this helps me to help them heal both physically and emotionally.

My inspiration comes from the strength I see from my patient's day in and day out. My motivation is that the care of the breast cancer patient has come such a long way and the treatment options we are able to offer patients comes from the tremendous research efforts of our predecessors. But in reality, we have only scratched the surface! When we find the actual cause of breast cancer and are able to completely prevent it for future generations, I will be happy to find another job.

Outside your office, what hobbies and passions do you enjoy?

My biggest passions outside of work are my family. I have a supportive and loving husband and 2 beautiful children that are the light of my life. Together, we love to travel and explore the beautiful coastal community we live in.

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