Cancer Sourcebook for Women, Fourth Edition


Cancer Sourcebook for Women, Fourth Edition, is a part of a large series of health reference volumes covering approximately 15,000 topics. Each volume targets a specific audience. This volume of 57 chapters, edited by Karen Bellenir, is a compilation of cancer information and reference sources for women. Because cancer is the second leading cause of death among women in the United States (as noted in the book’s preface), Cancer Sourcebook for Women is a timely and important volume.

This text covers information about gynecologic cancers as well as other cancers that lead to large numbers of deaths among women. The book is aimed primarily at the information-seeking layperson, though it is also appropriate as a basic reference in a practice library. The osteopathic physician will derive benefit from the patient-centric approach and the chapters on patient support.

Organized in 8 main parts, Cancer Sourcebook for Women answers many common questions asked by women who have cancer or who are at risk for cancer. Part 1, “Understanding Cancer Risks in Women,” is, in my opinion, of great importance. The text includes discussions of infections caused by the human papillomavirus and of breast and ovarian cancers caused by the BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes—topics that have received much recent publicity. This section also covers known carcinogenic substances, such as tobacco. In addition, it dispels some common cancer myths, such as the myth that chemotherapy is always associated with nausea and vomiting.

Part 2, “Breast Cancer,” is a reasonably thorough and well-referenced group of chapters on this common form of cancer, detailing everything from risk factors (eg, BRCA1, BRCA2) to surgery and other treatments. A special discussion addresses breast cancer during pregnancy, a condition that affects only about 1 in 3000 pregnant women (as noted in chapter 12). The inclusion of this material serves as an indication of the completeness of the information on breast cancer in this book.

Part 3, “Gynecologic Cancers,” consists of 91 pages packed with information on cervical, endometrial, ovarian, uterine, vaginal, and vulvar cancers, as well as gestational trophoblastic tumors. The chapters in this section discuss each cancer in some detail, including risk, prevention, detection, and treatment. Unfortunately, the material on cancer staging does not include recent revisions to the International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics’ staging system published in the International Journal of Gynecology and Obstetrics (2009;105[2]:103-104). Instead, the older staging system is provided. Although a relatively minor point, the outdated information could cause some confusion among patients and providers.

In part 4, “Other Cancers of Special Concern to Women,” the authors outline information and references on cancers of the anus, biliary tract, colon, lung, pancreas, skin, and thyroid. Important basic facts about these disorders are provided, including facts on risk, diagnostic testing, treatment, and follow-up care. A helpful discussion of hereditary colorectal cancer and hereditary nonpolyposis colon cancer is also included.

The remainder of Cancer Sourcebook for Women consists of the most important material in the book, in my opinion. As a cancer specialist, I believe that this material will best apply to both patients and referring primary care physicians.

Part 5, “Diagnosing and Treating Cancer,” is based on multiple sources from the National Cancer Institute and the American Cancer Society. Patients are guided through the maze of diagnostic tests, treatment procedures, and relevant terminology. Instructions on how to interpret tests and how to find qualified doctors are included. Patients who read this text will learn about a wide variety of therapeutic modalities, such as chemotherapy, radiation, biological treatments (eg, interleukins, monoclonal antibodies, vaccines), and complementary and alternative treatments (eg, biofeedback, homeopathy, tai chi). A brief section on “manipulative and body-based practices” is included, though it does not mention osteopathic manipulative treatment.

Part 6, “Coping With the Side Effects of Cancer and Cancer Treatments,” is a good reference section for individuals with cancer and for their care providers. Addressed here are the bulk of the questions and concerns that I encounter daily, such as questions about controlling pain, dealing with hair loss, and fighting fatigue. A necessarily systematic approach to symptom recognition and control is outlined, and the information is accurate and helpful. Both medical treatments and traditional remedies are clearly described.

In part 7, “Women’s Issues in Cancer Survivorship,” the authors present helpful information related to many real-world issues encountered by women with cancer. Everything from how to tell the children to mind-and-body spiritual healing is included in these pages. Cancer-related diet tips, exercise, and sexuality are discussed. Space is also given to preservation of fertility and other pregnancy issues faced by women with cancer. These topics are all openly and professionally presented.

The last part of this reference, “Additional Help and Information,” serves as a valuable glossary and collection of information sources for patients with cancer and their care providers. This section of the book lists both traditional and nontraditional sources of information, including professional societies, advocacy groups, and support services. The final chapter discusses how to find a cancer support group.

Cancer Sourcebook for Women is a useful, thoughtfully organized reference book and an excellent resource for the special needs of women with cancer. Although perhaps not for the average home bookshelf, it is a fitting resource for women with cancer, for lay care providers, and for medical professionals who encounter female patients with this disease. I showed my copy to a cancer survivor, and she felt it should be kept available for others to reference. I have placed my copy within easy reach of my patients.

Gregory S. Willis, DO
Gynecologic Oncologist, Pinnacle Health Systems Chief of Minimally Invasive Surgery, Holy Spirit Health Systems, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania