

## In pandemic, breast cancer treatment a sometimes solo flight for Vancouver women; Pandemic has made put more strain on those battling the disease

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### 9 Photos



Childhood friends Sherry Cianni, left, and Heather James found out they had breast cancer this spring and have navigated treatment together during the pandemic. "I never thought I'd have breast cancer, but I have a buddy, someone to lean on," James said. "They're not just a stranger you're calling." (Alisha Jucevic/The Columbian)

Heather James, 50, dropped a dollop of conditioner on her chest while showering. When she wiped it off, she felt a lump.

Within the hour, James was in a doctor's office. An appointment would normally take days to schedule, but because it was April, soon after the coronavirus pandemic arrived in Clark County, James was able to be seen almost immediately. The empty waiting room that greeted her was a sign of the loneliness to come.

“It looked like it was a ghost town,” said James, who lives in Vancouver. “I was the only person in the lobby.”

There’s no good time to have breast cancer. But James and others diagnosed this year must navigate treatment during a pandemic that has killed 1 million worldwide. They live in fear of catching COVID-19 while they’re weakened by punishing treatments. Precautions at clinics and hospitals mean they have to go to appointments alone, without the company of supportive family and friends.

As James put it, her phone is her best friend during chemotherapy infusions. She also reads self-help books.

Time moves slower during treatment, James said. If something goes wrong — such as James’ allergic reaction during her first treatment — it feels scarier to James without family or friends in the room.

“The sad part about all that is I had to do it alone,” James said. “It’s difficult with my family being on the outside and me being alone on the inside.”

Because of the pandemic, James, who works at nLIGHT, has kept her social circle small. It has taken a toll on her mental and emotional wellbeing.

“No one can come visit me at home. That’s difficult. I’m a very social person,” James said.

James keeps in touch Sherry Cianni, a good friend diagnosed with breast cancer at about the same time as James.

Cianni, a 56-year-old Vancouver resident, said “months have melted together” ever since her diagnosis.

When Cianni went for care after finding her lump, she was greeted by a clinic worker in a hazmat suit who escorted her through the back door.

“The whole process was scary,” Cianni said. “It’s like coronavirus and breast cancer happened at once. It still hasn’t really set in that I have breast cancer.”

Like James, Cianni said she was lonely during treatment and worried about catching COVID-19. Cianni limited in-person contact with family members, instead making video calls so they could help her keep her spirits up.

“It would have been nice if someone could have been there to hold my hand through all of this,” Cianni said.

Plus, as soon as she was diagnosed, Cianni started worrying about money. She's single and works full time, but her shipping-and-receiving job pays minimum wage.

Cianni's supervisors were flexible about her schedule, but she still wasn't sure if she'd be able to cover her rent. The Pink Lemonade Project and Vancouver Women's Foundation provided financial help to make sure Cianni would have housing stability during treatment.

"It was a very comforting feeling to have assistance from those people," Cianni said.

### **Disparities highlighted**

The pandemic has exacerbated disparities that existed before, said Becky Price, a nurse navigator with Compass Oncology.

Some cancer patients grapple with financial hardship because they can't work during treatment for fear of catching COVID-19 and developing complications.

Meanwhile, other women have delayed breast cancer screenings, even though early detection is key to survival.

"Patients were too scared to go into a clinic," Price said.

While the pandemic has complicated James and Cianni's battles against breast cancer, they both feel they've kept a positive outlook.

"It's made me appreciate life a whole lot more," Cianni said. "You never know when something like this is going to come at you."

Last month, friends organized a drive-by parade for James, which Cianni attended and The Columbian [covered](#). James said people read the story in Turkey, Italy and Germany and contacted her.

James said she's not good at accepting help because she doesn't want pity, but she has learned to lean on others. She has also learned more about herself: "I'm stronger than I thought I was."