

The Expert Is In: Donna-Marie Manasseh, MD



"New drug therapies and surgical techniques have been progressing at a faster pace than they have in decades," says Dr. Donna-Marie Manasseh, the new breast cancer surgeon at NYU Langone Hospital—Brooklyn. "This enables patients at all stages—including stage 4 patients—to survive longer."

NYU Langone Hospital—Brooklyn's new breast cancer surgeon [Dr. Donna-Marie Manasseh](#) discusses genomic testing that reduces the need for chemotherapy, unique challenges of treating cancer within the diverse Brooklyn community, and advice for patients dealing with tough moments.

What drew you to specialize in breast cancer?

When I was a resident, the woman who would have become my mother-in-law was diagnosed with breast cancer and ultimately succumbed to the disease 18 months later. Seeing what we had, and didn't have, at that time in the world of cancer treatments led me to this field. To be a part of the journey of someone battling breast cancer—and to make it as empowering of an experience as possible—is what attracted me to the specialty.

How do you and your team treat patients in the first 24 to 48 hours?

A cancer diagnosis often comes from out of the blue; most patients have no symptoms. Right away I say: Take a breath, take some time, you don't have to make any decisions immediately. We ask that patients pick a support person, whether it's a family member, a co-worker, or a friend, who will be a positive presence in their lives as they move forward. I also suggest patients find things that make them laugh and smile, that bring them joy. These factors help to make the rest of the journey a little easier because they can tell people, "I just need a moment" before they put an IV in, for instance, to think of that positive thought. I teach them to rely on that for the tough moments. Then they can feel ready and in control.

What is unique about treating cancer patients in our community?

I have come to appreciate Brooklyn's many diverse populations, cultures, and unique points of view. I have had patients who, for cultural reasons, have alternate views of how cancer should be treated—and whether the word should even be used. My team and I have had to work with the patients and their families to ensure their belief systems about cancer are included in their cancer care and treatment. So I have learned to tailor my approach to different populations, to meet them where they are. If I can't be the person to do it at NYU Langone Hospital—Brooklyn, we have a team of Perlmutter Cancer Center cultural navigators who guide my team and patients on this journey.

What were the greatest clinical advances in breast cancer treatments over the last five years?

We're targeting cancer more specifically. In the past, if a tumor was larger than a centimeter, or a node was positive, the person automatically received chemotherapy. But with the progress of genomic technology—being able to identify what's going on in the tumor itself—we can better predict which drug regimens will get the best response from the tumor. Sometimes we'll use chemotherapy, sometimes immunotherapy, sometimes neither. Additionally, new drug therapies and surgical techniques have been progressing at a faster pace than they have in decades. This enables patients at all stages—including stage 4 patients—to survive longer. We're also looking at other options before operating. In the past, if a tumor was a certain size, we would automatically remove the breast. If a lymph node was positive, we

would take out the majority of nodes, risking difficult side effects. Today, there are some drug regimens that can shrink the tumor to be small enough that we may be able to do a much smaller procedure.

In what other ways is your team's approach to breast cancer distinct?

We focus not just on offering patients the best breast care, we also concentrate on how they are treated. We look at you as a family member. One of the reasons I joined NYU Langone Hospital—Brooklyn is it has a small-town feel in many ways. There's a level of warmth and hope while providing innovative and leading-edge cancer care. We know patients want to be healthy again, and we will do everything we can to get you there. You are now part of our community. Your success is our success.

TOOLS

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