

Recovery on the menu

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Breast cancer survivors bond over healthy meals and shared experience

We all know that breaking bread together builds relationships and nurtures the soul. So when Toronto's Susan Porrit heard about Good Food For Life, a free nutritional support program for survivors of breast cancer, she was intrigued.

"It sounded very interesting," she says. "I've always been concerned about my diet and I wanted to learn about new foods and to acquire some new cooking techniques."

But it wasn't only a desire to learn new knife skills or discover pomegranates that drew her to the program.

Like many pre-menopausal women who have struggled with breast cancer, Porrit wanted to meet others like herself.

It was while sharing her story of recovery and hearing about other women's experiences that she discovered the unusual ruby red superfruit that is rich in potassium, vitamin C and anti-oxidants.

"It's not something I would normally have bought," says the 37 year-old mother whose treatment -- completed three years ago -- included a lumpectomy, chemotherapy and radiation.

The weekly program, run by the non-profit group **FoodShare Toronto**, is funded by the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation and includes eight three-hour sessions.

In its effort to support lifelong dietary changes, **Good Food For Life** not only addresses nutritional themes but also introduces new foods, offers hands-on food preparation skills, teaches mindful eating, and encourages self-reflection. All while providing an environment for friendship to flourish.

It's both instructional and interactive, Porrit says. "At home, you get into a rut of eating and cooking the same things. But in the program, a chef demonstrates various recipes around a different theme each week. We then make the meal and sit down together to eat it. During the informal discussions that follow, we dialogue about how we're coping post-treatment."

Co-ordinator Sandra Flear says the program's success is due to the fact that the participants are involved with one another and not just receiving information. "They enjoy the process of cooking and eating together," she says. "Those things are useful, but the women also get a lot out of the social support provided by the program."

While the link between breast cancer and nutrition is still uncertain, research solidly shows that eating well promotes general good health. But after experiencing an illness like cancer, people can become tense around food, says Flear, who is also a psychotherapist.

"My role is to make things a little calmer around food issues, to not encourage the myth that you can safeguard your health by doing anything exactly a 'right' way, and to communicate that food is one part of a lifestyle -- albeit an important one," she says.

"Some of us had experienced fear of some foods, so dispelling myths around various foods was an important part of the program," says Eva Kaparti, a 53 year-old survivor who enjoyed the program's emphasis on variety.

"I thought I ate well before, but taking this program opened up a whole new avenue of food colours."

Good Food For Life is also fun, says Porrit, who loved the chocolate session, got over her fear of frying and became a whiz at deciphering labels.

While the program is in session in downtown Toronto, future sessions and locations are planned. For more information, contact Sandra Flear at 416-363-6441, ext 248.

Kaparti acknowledges that the ritual of cooking together and eating was wonderful, but the support that she experienced from other women was the icing on the cake: "There's a special bond. We've all been through breast cancer, so the connection we felt is an important one." She adds: "We want to carry on, but we still have issues. There are things we can talk about over friendship and food that others might not understand."

[click here for FoodShare's Good Food For Life program](#)

