

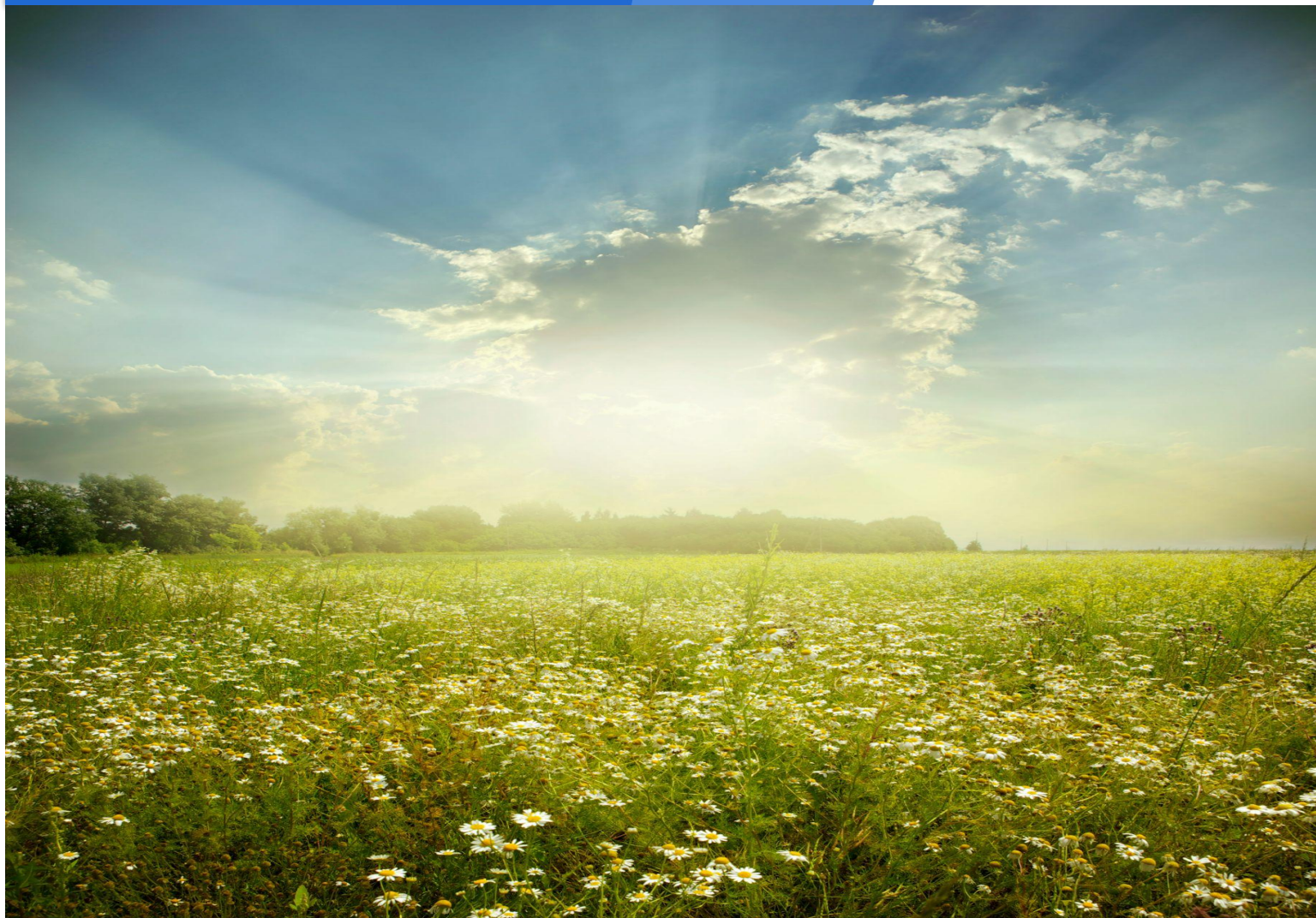
About you: Care after cancer

Survivorship newsletter

Spring/Summer 2026



Ascension



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After Cancer

Supporting Sexual Health & Intimacy Challenges



Erin Sullivan-Wagner

Erin Sullivan Wagner is an anal cancer survivor. As a result of her radiation treatment, she experienced sexual health side effects that went untreated for several months. Because there was no process in place to address sexual health concerns or refer patients timely, the damage caused by radiation became permanent. Her relationship with her husband was forever changed. She began a life coaching business, helping patients with intimacy challenges post cancer. She also started the non-profit organization, After Cancer, Inc, providing educational resources for oncology professionals on addressing sexual health in a cancer care setting, with a mission that all patients impacted by cancer will be screened for sexual health side effects as a standard of care.

How one survivor's experience led to a nonprofit organization helping cancer care teams address the often-overlooked sexual health side effects caused by cancer treatment—and support patients navigating changes to body image, desire, physical and emotional intimacy, and overall quality of life.

After cancer treatment ends, many patients expect life to return to normal. But for Erin Sullivan-Wagner, survivorship brought a new set of challenges she had not been warned about. There was no process in place to address sexual health side effects, and scar tissue from radiation—left untreated for six months—resulted in an inability to have penetrative sex. The damage was permanent.

“It was surprising how little my care team knew about the impact of treatment on my sexual health, and how little information existed for patients navigating these challenges,” Sullivan-Wagner said. That experience ultimately led Sullivan-Wagner to found After Cancer, a nonprofit organization working to ensure that sexual health and quality-of-life concerns become part of routine cancer care.

From Patient to Advocate

Following her cancer diagnosis and treatment, Sullivan-Wagner began working as a life coach, supporting people navigating major life transitions. Through conversations with cancer survivors, she noticed a recurring theme: many patients felt unprepared for how treatment could affect their sense of self and identity, their libido, communication with partners, and their emotional and physical intimate relationships.

At the same time, when speaking with individual care team members, many clinicians expressed that they wanted to help but lacked the training, language, or time to address these sensitive topics during busy clinical visits.

Recognizing this gap, Sullivan-Wagner began collaborating with oncologists, gynecologists, urologists, nurses, navigators, therapists, and social workers to explore ways to bring these conversations into routine cancer care.

Those early collaborations eventually led to the development of a grant-funded initiative called *The All of Me Project*, which focused on helping cancer care teams address sexual health side effects as part of routine cancer care. The goal was to equip providers and care teams with practical tools to normalize sexual health conversations, set appropriate expectations for patients, establish referral pathways to specialists, and create space for patients to raise concerns or ask questions as needed.

Building a National Resource

As the work expanded, Sullivan-Wagner formally transitioned After Cancer, Inc. into a nonprofit organization in 2022. Today, the organization partners with cancer centers, healthcare systems, and oncology professionals across the country to integrate sexual health and intimacy into workflows for comprehensive cancer care.

After Cancer develops practical resources designed specifically for busy clinical environments, including:

- Accredited online training courses for oncology providers and care teams: <https://www.aftercancer.co/online-courses/>
- Workshops, communication tools, and referral roadmaps to help integrate sexual health services into routine care
- Patient education handouts available in English, Spanish, and French, which clinics can share digitally or in print. These resources empower patients to better understand and communicate changes to their sexual health, while also equipping providers with tools to normalize and support these important conversations

Patient handouts include topics such as:

- Managing low libido, hot flashes, and hormonal changes
- Guidance on lubricants, pelvic floor therapy, and sensate focus exercises
- Navigating dating, altered body image, and fertility post-diagnosis
- Resources for partners, adolescents and young adults (AYA), and individuals with ostomies or lymphedema
- Support for specific challenges such as side effects from androgen deprivation therapy, and penile rehab

These services and resources support nurses, advanced practice providers, physicians, social workers, and other members of the cancer care team in addressing quality-of-life side effects with patients.

Why This Matters for Patients

Research consistently shows that sexual health concerns affect more than 50% of people treated for cancer, yet the topic is rarely discussed in clinical settings. Cancer treatments can impact hormones, nerve function, energy levels, body image, fertility, and emotional well-being—affecting sexual function across all stages of the sexual response cycle. As a result, intimacy challenges can place unexpected strain on relationships. When patients understand that sexual side effects are common and know what to expect, it can make a tremendous difference in how they cope and seek support.

Displaying patient education materials related to sexual health side effects in waiting areas and exam rooms can help open the door for patients to ask questions and access the support they need.

This work reflects a growing recognition across healthcare—including within systems like Ascension—that truly compassionate cancer care must support the whole person, including sexual health. By helping care teams normalize these conversations, After Cancer aims to ensure patients receive guidance earlier, rather than feeling left to navigate these challenges on their own.

Patient-Informed Programs

Many of After Cancer's programs are shaped directly by patient experiences. Recent projects include the development of a patient education course focused on sexual health and intimacy during and after cancer treatment. The course was created with input from patient focus groups representing multiple cancer types. To help ensure the course meets the needs of those impacted by cancer, patients, providers, and care teams are invited to review the material and share feedback by April 20, as the final version is prepared for release at the end of May: <https://www.aftercancer.co/learning-modules/> The course allows patients to explore topics at their own pace through short learning modules and expert-led videos, covering subjects such as:

- Physical changes related to treatment
- Body image and changes in desire
- Emotional and relationship impacts
- Communicating with partners
- Practical strategies and resources for support

The program was developed with funding from the Iowa Cancer Consortium and the Iowa Department of Health and Human Services to expand access to meaningful, patient-centered education. An additional course specifically for metastatic breast cancer patients is scheduled for release in late 2026.

A Mission Focused on Whole-Person Care

At its core, After Cancer's mission is simple: to ensure cancer care supports the whole person—especially sexual health—not just the disease. Cancer affects every aspect of life, and the goal is to help healthcare teams feel confident addressing sensitive topics so patients receive the information and support they deserve. By partnering with healthcare systems and oncology professionals, After Cancer continues to expand its reach, working to make conversations about sexual health, intimacy, and quality of life a standard part of cancer care.

Getting Involved

After Cancer operates as a largely volunteer-driven organization, supported by individuals who are passionate about improving the quality of life for people impacted by cancer. Patients, caregivers, and professionals contribute their time and talents to help expand the organization's reach. Volunteers assist with projects such as:

- Social media support
- Administrative coordination
- Grant research and funding opportunities
- Translation services to expand access to educational materials
- Marketing and outreach

Patients and caregivers are also invited to participate in focus groups, review educational resources, and share perspectives that help guide future programs. Patient voices are essential, and their insights ensure resources truly reflect the needs of those navigating life during and after cancer treatment.

To learn more about After Cancer, access educational resources, or get involved, visit: www.aftercancer.co

Time To Eat

Welcome Spring

By: Wendy Balister, RD, CD

As the frost of winter recedes and the first green shoots appear, spring reminds us that life is defined by its ability to begin again. For the survivorship community, spring isn't just a change in the weather; it's a mirror of resilience.

The days grow longer and the sun shines brighter. Often we feel a natural surge of vitality and motivation, shaking off the winter chill to embrace a more active and energized lifestyle. However for those who have undergone cancer treatment, cancer related fatigue can linger as a common side effect. Cancer related fatigue can be different than feeling tired, it may not be resolved by napping and can persist after a good night's sleep. Cancer related fatigue has many possible causes. The type of cancer you have, the kinds of treatments you're having, and your overall health can all result in fatigue. If you are struggling with exhaustion, it is important to discuss your concerns with your doctor. Don't assume tiredness is just part of the cancer experience. Your doctor may examine you and ask questions to better understand your symptoms and suggest options to improve your energy level.

Healthy food choices can help reduce fatigue, including cancer related fatigue. Here are some tips:

- Aim to increase your intake of vegetables, try to include a leafy green vegetable, along with red, yellow or orange vegetables most days.
- Do not forget to include at least two servings of fruits daily. In addition to citrus fruits; strawberries, blackberries and kiwi would be good choices because they are also good sources of Vitamin C.
- Choose whole grains; for example oats, quinoa, brown rice or wild rice over refined carbohydrates such as white breads, white rice and pastries.
- Work in sources of omega-3 fats. Sources include oily fish like salmon and also plant sources such as walnuts or ground flax seeds.
- The synergistic effect of these foods provides a greater benefit than any individual food. A varied diet pattern is important for reducing cancer-related fatigue.

Spring Recipe Ideas

These ideas focus on anti-inflammatory ingredients and easy preparation for those managing lingering fatigue.

1. Refreshing Strawberry & Arugula Salad

The Benefit: Strawberries are packed with Vitamin C to support your immune system, while arugula provides bitter compounds that aid digestion.

- The Quick Fix: Toss fresh berries, baby arugula, and toasted walnuts with a simple balsamic vinaigrette. Top with grilled chicken or chickpeas.
- Survivor Tip: Walnuts are excellent for fighting brain fog.

2. Zesty Turmeric & Ginger Roasted Carrots

The Benefit: Both turmeric and ginger are powerful anti-inflammatories that can help soothe joint pain and nausea.

- The Quick Fix: Toss sliced carrots in olive oil, turmeric, ginger powder, and a pinch of black pepper. Roast at 400°F until caramelized.
- Survivor Tip: A great, easy-to-digest side dish that adds a pop of color and antioxidants to any meal.



Cancer Prevention and Wellness

Gail's Law Expands Access to Breast Cancer Screenings in Wisconsin



Jennifer Minessale

MSN, APNP, AOCNP

Jennifer Minessale is an advanced practice nurse practitioner with Ascension Medical Group. She is board-certified in the care of adult patients as an Advanced Oncology Certified Nurse Practitioner (AOCNP). She completed the City of Hope's Cancer Genomics Intensive course.

Jennifer strives to empower patients and their families to become advocates in their own healthcare by educating the individual and family on their cancer risks, lifestyle factors that affect development of cancer, and genetic risk factors. She individualizes care for each patient based upon their particular cancer risk factors and goals.

Women in Wisconsin will soon have greater access to breast cancer screenings under a new law signed by Governor Tony Evers on March 19, 2026. This law will fully go into effect on January 1, 2027.

Known as Gail's Law, the legislation requires insurers, including BadgerCare, to fully cover supplemental screenings such as breast MRIs and ultrasounds. These tests will be covered as preventive screenings for women at increased risk of breast cancer, and as diagnostic tools for those who need further evaluation for an abnormality following a mammogram. While previous laws required coverage for initial screening mammograms, this new law eliminates out-of-pocket costs for women with dense breast tissue or those considered high risk due to factors such as family history or prior abnormal biopsies.

The law is named in honor of Gail Zeamer of Neenah, who died of breast cancer in 2024 at age 56. After being diagnosed in 2016, Zeamer became a passionate advocate for expanded screening access. Due to gaps in her insurance coverage, she was unable to obtain an ultrasound or MRI to evaluate a suspicious lump, tests that may have detected her cancer earlier. Zeamer also had dense breast tissue, which can make cancer more difficult to detect with standard mammograms.

According to the Breast Cancer Research Foundation, about half of women over age 40 have dense breasts, a factor that increases breast cancer risk. The American Cancer Society estimates that more than 6,000 women in Wisconsin will be diagnosed with breast cancer in 2026. Early detection remains critical, nearly 99% of women diagnosed at the earliest stage survive at least five years, compared to about 32% of those diagnosed at the most advanced stage, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

If you believe you may qualify for supplemental screening, such as a breast MRI or ultrasound, contact your primary care provider or oncology team. You may also reach out to the Cancer Prevention and Wellness team for a comprehensive risk assessment and guidance on appropriate screening options. They can be reached at 262-785-2273.

Movement

What To Do When Exercise Feels Impossible



Christi Katz
OTD, MOT, OTR/L, CLT

Christi has been an occupational therapist for 13 years, is the Cancer Rehab Lead for PT Solutions - Wisconsin, and is the clinic manager at the Milwaukee Cancer Rehab clinic. She is a certified lymphedema therapist and holds a specialty certification in Chemotoxicity and Exercise Management from the Physiological Oncology Rehabilitation Institute, in addition to completing over 100 hours of continuing education in oncology-related topics. Christi is also a part-time Clinical Assistant Professor of Occupational Therapy at Marquette University, teaching courses in Clinical and Health Conditions, Evidence-Based Practice, and Practical Applications in Occupational Therapy.

Does it ever feel like a cruel joke when you are told that exercise is the best remedy for cancer-related fatigue? Doctors and therapists often discuss the benefits of exercise for fatigue, bone density, strength, mood, and managing side effects during and after treatment. But, when you're exhausted, overwhelmed, and juggling multiple appointments, knowing where to start can seem impossible.

Cancer treatment affects every part of your body physically, emotionally, and cognitively during active treatment and sometimes long after it ends. Add in the time commitment of infusions, scans, follow-up appointments, and navigating life... it's completely reasonable to wonder how you are supposed to prioritize exercise.

The American Cancer Society recommends that individuals with cancer aim for 150 minutes per week of moderate-intensity activity with 2–3 days per week of resistance (strength) training. At first glance, that may sound overwhelming. As a cancer rehabilitation therapist with over 13 years of experience, here's my advice:

1) Start where you are

There is a physiological difference between "activity" and "exercise," but what matters most is your perceived exertion, which is how hard your body feels like it's working. Think of it on a scale of 1–10:

- 1–2: Very light effort
- 3–4: Light
- 5–6: Moderate (breathing a little heavier but still able to talk)
- 7+: Vigorous

For someone in treatment, walking to the mailbox might feel like a 5. For someone further into survivorship, a brisk 20-minute walk might be a 5. Both are beneficial. The goal is not to match someone else's pace. It's to work at the level that challenges your body safely.

2) Understand that 'moderate activity' can change daily

Cancer treatment affects blood counts, sleep, hydration, pain levels, mood, and energy. Because of this, 'moderate' activity may look different from one day to the next. One day, moderate activity might be an extra lap around the house each time you get up to use the bathroom. Another day, it could be a short walk outside, slightly longer or faster than the day before. This variability does not mean you are failing or not meeting recommendations. Progress during and after treatment is not always linear.

3) Incorporate exercise into daily tasks

Research shows that when we add exercise to routines we already have, we are much more likely to stick with it. These small efforts add up over time. Try:

- Mini squats at the counter while brushing your teeth
- Sit-to-stands from the couch during TV commercials
- Wall push-ups while waiting for food to warm up
- Heel raises while washing dishes

4) The best type of exercise during/after treatment is what you enjoy

The best type of exercise during and after treatment is the one you will continue doing. Enjoyment improves consistency. That may be: walking, gentle yoga, pickleball, water exercise, group fitness classes – Consider the community resources Ascension offers for survivors!

5) Ask for help if you need it

If you're experiencing neuropathy, lymphedema, dizziness, joint pain, cardiac concerns, or other medical conditions, a cancer rehabilitation therapist can create a personalized, safe exercise plan tailored to your treatment history and current function. Rehabilitation is appropriate at any stage of the cancer journey - during treatment, immediately after, or years into survivorship. Ask your doctor for a referral.

Your body has been through something significant and may still be healing in many ways. If it feels impossible right now, start small. So much about cancer treatment can be beyond your control, but movement and exercise can be one area where you have a say.



Within The Community

Support groups and programs

Racine

- **Multiple Myeloma Support Group (Hybrid)**
Meets the second Monday of each month from 6:30-8 p.m. in the Cancer Center Conference Room at Ascension All Saints Hospital. *For more information, contact Sarah Jurkiewicz sewi@IMFsupport.org.*
- **Fit To Fight (In person)**
A exercise program for patients currently undergoing cancer treatment, or cancer survivors who have recently completed treatments in our Ascension Wisconsin Cancer Care Centers. Classes are twice weekly. Patients receiving care through the Ascension Wisconsin Cancer Center may qualify for a scholarship: Includes a three - month membership for the cancer patient and one support person. *For more information or to register, call 262-687-4377.*

To learn more or to register for Ascension Wisconsin's Smoking Cessation Support Group Program, scan the QR code.



Fox Valley

- **St. Elizabeth's Cancer Support Group (In person)**
Patients and their support persons may attend this support group at Ascension St. Elizabeth in the Helen Fowler Board Room. This support group meets the first Monday of each month from 6-7 p.m. No meeting in July or December. *For more information, contact Carrie Olm, social worker at carrie.olm@ascension.org.*
- **Mercy Hospital Cancer Support Group (In person)**
This support group meets in-person every second Thursday of the month (starting February 2026) between 12 p.m. -1 p.m. at Ascension NE Wisconsin-Mercy Medical Center Wisdom-Reverence Classroom. There is no commitment - come as often or a little as you would like. *For more information, contact Casey Auer, social worker, at 920-223-8087 or casey.auer@ascension.org.*
- **A Time To Heal (In person)**
A FREE 9-week program designed to help cancer survivors of any cancer diagnosis regain their physical, emotional, and spiritual health after cancer treatment. During this program you will work with trained facilitators and meet others who understand your journey. These weekly sessions provide evidence based advice on topics including nutrition, exercise, building resilience, and moving forward in the face of fear. Next session is estimated to start Fall 2026. *For more information or to be placed on the notification list, contact kayla.kalbacken@ascension.org.*

Within The Community

Support Groups and Programs

Virtual

- **Breast Cancer Support Group (Virtual only)**
Meets the second Wednesday of each month from 5:30-6:30 p.m. virtually only. *For more information, contact Paula Weckman at paula.weckman@ascension.org or 414-585-1598.*



Support our survivorship programs

If you found Ascension's Survivorship Program helpful, consider supporting others on their cancer journey. Your generosity helps us continue offering meaningful survivorship programs across Ascension Wisconsin. Scan the QR code or visit giveawf.org/survivorship to learn more or make a gift donation.



Wauwatosa/Elmbrook/Franklin

- **Journey to Wellness (In person)**
Meets the first Wednesday of each month from 10-11:00 a.m. at the Chapel of Reiman Cancer Center. *For more information, contact biannca.kramer@ascension.org*
- **Coping with Cancer Support Group (In person)**
Meets the third Tuesday of each month from 12-1 p.m. in the first floor lobby conference room. *For more information, contact Amanda Hanson 262-780-4255 or amanda.hanson1@ascension.org.*
- **Prostate Support Group (In person)**
Meets the fourth Tuesday of each month from 5:30-7 p.m. in the fifth floor Conference Room 5B. No Meeting in July or December. *For more information, contact Leanne Walz leanne.walz@ascension.org.*
- **Ostomy Support Group (In person)**
Meets the first Thursday of each month from 10-11:00 a.m in the fifth floor conference room A/B. For those who have a colostomy, ileostomy, urostomy or are anticipating ostomy surgery. Please RSVP by Monday the week of the meeting to Ashley Szmanda. For more information, contact Ashley Szmanda 414-447-2146 or ashley.szmanda@ascension.org.
- **Yoga Connection - SE Mayfair Road (In person)**
Eight week yoga class that is designed for cancer survivors at any stage, and if desired, a support person. The yoga sessions include: gentle stretching, low impact and restorative poses, relaxation techniques and guided meditation and breathwork. Registration is required. *For more information, contact Leanne Walz at 414-256-1955 or Amanda Hanson at 262-780-4255.*

Within The Community

Survivorship events

Cancer Survivorship Educational Health Fair

May 9, 2026 | 9:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.

Brookfield Conference Center | 325 S Moorland Rd., Brookfield, WI, 53005

Free event – Registration is not required but requested*

Ascension Wisconsin's Cancer Survivorship Committee is proud to once again host our Annual Cancer Survivorship Educational Health Fair, a free National Cancer Survivorship Day® community event dedicated to honoring survivors, supporting caregivers, and strengthening community connections.

The theme for this year's event is *The Survivorship Village: Where Healing Continues*, guided by the message "walking forward with you." Designed as a village-style experience, the event invites attendees to explore survivorship at their own pace. Throughout the day, participants may choose to attend optional breakout sessions led by expert presenters or spend time mingling with others, enjoying food, and connecting with community organizations and survivorship resources available throughout the Village.

Scan the QR code to the right to learn more or to register for AW Cancer Survivorship Educational Health Fair



Blooming Beyond Cancer- A National Cancer Survivorship Day Celebration in Fox Valley

Thursday June 4th, evening session from 5:00pm- 6:30pm

Friday June 5th, morning session from 10:00am - 11:30am

Ascension NE Wisconsin - St. Elizabeth Hospital | 1506 S Oneida St. Fowler Conference Room, Appleton, WI, 54915

Ascension Wisconsin's Blossoming Beyond Cancer survivorship event is created to recognize the courage it takes to move through diagnosis, treatment, recovery, and the ongoing journey of cancer survivorship. Whether you are newly navigating life after a cancer diagnosis, in active treatment, years beyond treatment, or supporting someone you love, this event is meant to remind you that you are not alone – and that healing continues in many forms.



Scan the QR code to the left to learn more or to register for Blooming Beyond Cancer Survivorship Event