

Testing with Treatment to Help Battle Breast Cancer

OSF Cancer clinical trials offer unique patient-physician partnership to help others

"I believe it's saving my life." says Donna Williams, of Rockford.

The 56 year old is participating in a clinical trial, through OSF HealthCare Saint Anthony Medical Center, that is testing a drug for breast cancer patients.

Diagnosed in July 2015 with Stage 2 breast cancer, Williams tumor did not respond to traditional chemotherapy, so she was invited to be part of a nationwide study of a medication - called palbociclib - that has proven effective in women with metastatic breast cancer.

"This clinical trial is giving me the quality of life that I wouldn't have otherwise," says Donna Williams, a breast cancer clinical trial participant through OSF HealthCare Saint Anthony Medical Center, in Rockford. "I think is keeping my cancer cells from joining into a tumor and it's giving me a great quality of life."

Williams is receiving the drug. But Mark Rogers, Lead Clinical Research Coordinator at Saint Anthony explains that cancer clinical trials are never an either/or proposition for participants.

"So many of the clinical trials that are out there right now are, basically, adding something, another layer of treatment, another layer of prevention to the standard of care that already out there," says Mark Rogers, Lead Clinical Research Coordinator at OSF HealthCare Saint Anthony Medical Center.

Presently cooperating with 16 breast cancer studies, Saint Anthony and OSF believe the resource and time commitment are invaluable in getting answers that may improve diagnosis and treatment for patients. However, as with Donna Williams' unique situation, finding qualified candidates for trials is difficult. Rogers says identifying a group of participants that have numerous similarities to their case and treatment is important to the success of a study.

"That means all sorts of things need to be looked at," says Rogers. "Particularly with their staging, their diagnosis and those kind of things. So, when you look at these large trials, sometimes they are very hard to get into because you have to meet certain criteria to get in there." Rogers adds, "They want people to have a certain set of treatment beforehand, like everybody's gone through the same types of things, to keep things as uniform as possible - so the end result is that we've looked at a group of people that is as similar as possible and what their outcomes were."

The study involving Williams - called PALLAS - is to determine if palbociclib can be as effective in women with Stage 2 or 3 breast cancer, as it has proven to be in women with metastatic breast cancer.

"So, they already know a whole lot of information about the safety of that drug," says Rogers. "It's been used for a while, so they already know that. So, some of that information has laid the groundwork. So, now we can take the information we already know about the drug and say - 'can we use this in another area and how effective is that going to be?'"

Clinical trials are a marathon, not a sprint. In the PALLAS study treatment is for two years, with ten years of follow-up. Still, Williams is grateful and proud to be part of the study group.

"I've tried to live through this treatment by letting people know you can go through bad things and still have faith," says Williams. And that being able to be on the clinical trial lets me touch the future generations - and that - I wanted to do that. You know, I wanted to leave a mark somehow to help people along the way."

Not all cancer clinical trials involve drugs. Rogers says there are also research studies that look at the impact lifestyle - like exercise and diet - has on the disease.

There is no cost to the patient to be involved in a clinical trial. For instance, the PALLAS study is underwritten by the National Cancer Institute, part of the National Institute of Health.