Q. Does cancer degrade our immune system?
A. Yes. One way is by thwarting the production of white blood cells. They are robust infection-fighters so diminishing them leaves us immune-compromised, thus making cancer patients more vulnerable to contracting COVID-19 and having a more difficult time battling it.

Q. If someone has cancer and they are treated with chemotherapy, does that make their immune system even more degraded?
A. Yes. Because chemo is a killer of white blood cells (while it is also killing cancer cells.)

Q. Does “maintenance therapy”- the long-term use of chemo to suppress the return of cancer -- also degrade the immune system?
A. Yes. Maintenance chemo is quite prevalent but because it begins after the initial cancer was placed into remission, a patient may not appreciate that their immune system continues to weaken.

Q. If it has been over two years since a patient’s cancer was placed into remission, and they’ve had no other treatments, has their immune system recovered?
A. Yes. But if the patient has been in remission for only a couple of months their immune system has not had sufficient time to build back up to a normal level.

Q. About how many adults on the East End are likely to be diagnosed with cancer during their lifetime?
A. About 40% of men and women will get cancer during their lifetime.

Q. If someone with cancer is getting chemotherapy, is it likely that they might skip a treatment to avoid going to a hospital where the risk of COVID-19 infection may be present?
A. Yes. During March and April 2020, compared to the same two months in 2019, patients were a “no show” in the case of about 30% of scheduled chemo sessions.

Q. What if a patient in treatment needs to go into a hospital for tests to monitor the effectiveness of their therapy-- like blood tests or CT scans. Were there more “no shows” for this in 2020 as compared to 2019?
A. Yes. This sort of hospital-based testing, as compared to a year ago, is down in many regions by as much as 75%.

Q. Is there any evidence that cancer patients on the East End are experiencing greater stress and anxiety levels because of the COVID-19 pandemic?
A. Yes. Fighting Chance counselors-- all licensed mental health professionals like LCSWs -- specialize in providing stress relief to cancer patients. We have seen an uptick in counseling requests beginning in mid-March and many of the calls are from people worried about the COVID-19 risk in one way or another.

Fighting Chance has offices in Sag Harbor and at the Phillips Family Cancer Center in Southampton.
For more details, or information please call 631 725 4646. Visit our website at www.fightingchance.org

The author of this column, Duncan Darrow, is the Founder and Chairman of Fighting Chance, a free-of-charge Cancer Counseling & Resource Center serving the East End for 18 years.

The author gratefully acknowledges the weekly newsletter, www.cancernet.org, published by the American Society of Clinical Oncology.