

BREAST CANCER: BE BREAST AWARE!

So few are prepared when the fear of cancer becomes a reality. Each year, over 22,000 Canadian women develop breast cancer. In Canada, 5,000 Canadian women of all ages, cultures and lifestyles die of breast cancer. It is the most common malignancy among Canadian women. Sadly, it is a disease that continues to affect a growing number of women of all ethnic backgrounds. Almost 1% of breast cancers do occur in men. We do know about many, as well as suspected, risk and protective factors.

Race and ethnic background seem to have little effect in the development of breast cancer. It is thought that less than 5% of breast cancers are inherited. However, more and more, lifestyle and environmental factors are seen as having a much bigger role. Since the ethnic groups who move to North America from “lower” risk countries such as Southeast Asia assume the same risk as the ‘average’ North American woman within one or two generations; lifestyle is increasingly being seen as being a big part in developing of breast cancer.

What is breast cancer?

Tumors are a collection of cells that grow abnormally and usually at a faster rate than normal cells. Tumors that are not able to spread throughout the body are called *benign* (not cancerous). However, tumors that are able to grow into other tissues or spread throughout the body are called *malignant*. While any of the cells in the breast can change, cancer cells start in the ducts or the glands. A cancer that starts in the ducts is called ductal carcinoma. A cancer that starts in the lobes is called lobular carcinoma.

Pre-cancerous cells may be found within the breast tissue. If in the ducts, it is called *ductal carcinoma in situ* (DCIS). If it is in the lobes, it is called *lobular carcinoma in situ* (LCIS). DCIS and LCIS are diseases where cancer cells are in the breast tissue and have not spread to other tissues. Because DCIS can spread throughout other breast tissue, treatment is usually recommended. However while LCIS does not need to be treated it does have to be monitored.

Once a cancer has grown into surrounding tissue it is called invasive (e.g., invasive ductal carcinoma or invasive lobular carcinoma).

What is a risk factor?

A risk factor refers to something that increases the chances of someone getting a disease, in this case, breast cancer. Some risk factors can be controlled, others not.

Risk factors that you can control:

- Exercise more often~Regular exercise can lower your risk and improve overall health.
- Reduce exposure to estrogen~Being exposed to estrogen over time increases risk.
- Stay at a healthy weight~ women who are overweight or under weight have an increased risk of developing breast cancer. Being overweight can increase the chance of breast cancer coming back after menopause.
- Reduce stress~Decreasing stress and increasing satisfaction levels improves overall health.

Risk factors you cannot control:

- Age~The risk of getting breast cancer increases with age.
- Personal history of breast cancer~If you have had breast cancer, you are at a higher risk of it coming back. You are also at a higher risk of developing a new cancer as compared to someone who has never had the disease.
- Family History~Breast cancer in the family increases your risk. Most women who develop breast cancer do not have a family history.
- Breast changes~At times, normal breast cells can undergo changes (e.g., a lump, thickness, calcifications). These changes are associated with increased risk.
- Menstrual history~Women who started their periods before the age of 12 or who went through menopause after the age of 55 have a higher risk of developing breast cancer due to more exposure to estrogen.

- Radiation~If radiation therapy was received to the chest area for another type of cancer especially during the teenage years, the risk of breast cancer goes up.
- Late pregnancy or no pregnancy~Women whose first pregnancy was after the age 30, or women who have never had children are at greater risk.
- Genetic abnormalities~known genetic mutations that increase the risk of breast cancer are present in some families; these include mutations in the genes BRCA1 and BRCA2. A genetic mutation accounts for 3% to 10% of breast cancers.

Early Detection/Screening

The earlier that breast cancer is found, the greater the chance that it can be cured, and with less aggressive treatment. Screening involves regular breast examinations on women who do not show any signs of breast problems, to find breast cancer at an early stage. The two most common methods of screening are a clinical breast exam and mammography. Many doctors and screening programs do recommend screening mammograms every two years for women between the ages of 50-69. Research shows that deaths are reduced by one third for women in this age group who have regular screening. If there is a family history of breast cancer or a biopsy showed abnormal cells, the doctor will recommend regular mammograms based on your needs.

Changes to look out for include:

- Size or shape - one breast might become larger or lower than the other
- Skin texture - such as puckering or dimpling of the skin
- Appearance or direction of nipple - e.g., one nipple might become turned-in (inverted)
- Discharge – blood-stained liquid from one or both nipples
- Rash or crusting - of the nipple or area around it
- Lump-in the breast or armpit
- Lumpy area-or unusual thickening of breast tissue that does not go away after a woman's period
- Pain-in part of the breast or armpit that is unrelated to periods

Regional Breast Health Program

Every year, about 700 people will be diagnosed within the Calgary Health Region. However, with the increase in technology, awareness, and screening programs, doctors have made great strides in early diagnosis, treatment and in reducing breast cancer deaths. The goal of the Regional Breast Health Program is to provide the best possible care to those people with a breast health concern. With increased awareness, advanced research, funding and treatments, more women and men affected by breast cancer will live to see a cure, will have a positive quality of life and to be able to say, “I have survived, I am a breast cancer survivor!”

The message from the Canadian Cancer Society includes: 1) Know your breast— be breast aware and take charge of your breast health. 2) Report any changes to your doctor and 3) Ensure regular clinical exams and mammograms based on your age and risk factors. Knowing the signs and symptoms of breast cancer may help save your life because the earlier the disease is discovered, the better the treatment options, and a better chance for a cure.

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To speak to a health professional, contact your family physician or speak to a registered nurse 24 hours a day, 7 days a week by calling Calgary Health Link:
Calgary: 403-943-LINK (5465) Edmonton: 780-408-LINK (5465) Or toll-free: 1-866-408-LINK (5465) Mandarin Health Link 403-943-1554, Cantonese Health Link 403-943-1556