

Breast Cancer

“...because of the Almighty, who blesses you with blessings of the heavens above, blessings of the deep that lies below, blessings of the breast and womb. Your father's blessings are greater than the blessings of the ancient mountain.” Genesis 49: 25, 26

Breast cancer is the most common cancer in women in the United States. (While men can get breast cancer, it is far less common.) Most of us know someone who is a breast cancer survivor, and it is a wonderful thing. Women who would have died or undergone radical surgery just 30 years ago are today able to receive treatment with the expectation of living full, healthy lives. Women have demanded and received an incredible amount of research and progress in the area of breast cancer, and it has paid off in a big way.

Survival rates can be attributed in large part to the early detection of breast tumors. The earlier they are detected, the better the odds of treating them. Today, most tumors are much smaller than they were 25 years ago. This is attributed to more women getting mammograms. The percentage of breast cancer tumors measuring less than one centimeter in 1975 was less than 10%, but rose to about 25% 20 years later. A government study revealed that only 20% of women over 40 years of age got a mammogram in 1987, but that number increased to a huge 70% in 2000! This early detection is thought to be a **major** factor in the survival of women diagnosed with breast cancer.

One of the first steps all women need to take is a self breast exam. This is a simple way to check the health of your breasts between regular mammograms. While not all lumps can be felt this way, many can. A nurse or physician can show you the proper way to do a monthly breast exam. It is important to do it on a regular basis so you can know how the tissue in and around your breast usually feels and be able to detect any changes.

First of all, **don't panic** if you do feel a lump. According to www.breastcancer.org, 8 out of 10 lumps are not cancerous. However, all lumps still need to be investigated by a physician. As a rule, check your breast a few days after your menstrual cycle, as they will be less swollen at that time. Most lumps are found by women during these self exams.

There are five steps to a self breast exam.

1. Look in the mirror. Check for dimpling, swelling, rash, or anything unusual
2. Raise your arms and look for the same things
3. Squeeze your nipples gently, and check for discharge. It may be milky or blood.
4. Lay down, and use your left hand to check the right breast. Begin with a soft touch, and then progress to a firmer one. Begin at the nipple, and go around, increasing your circle. Also check the entire area from your collarbone to just above your abdomen. Repeat on the other side.
5. Then repeat step 4 while standing up. It's easiest in the shower while the skin is slick.

After a few months of self exams, you will find it much easier to remember and perform the steps. Like anything, practice makes perfect.

Breast cancer, like many health problems, has a number of risk factors you should be aware of. A risk factor is anything that increases the chances of developing breast cancer. Like most diseases, some risk factors can be controlled, and some cannot. Those that are out of our control including being a woman and growing older, a family or personal history of breast cancer, and previous chest radiation as a treatment for a medical condition such as Hodgkin disease. Not having children, or having a first child when over 30, taking birth control or hormone replacement therapy, drinking more than two alcoholic beverages a day, obesity and a high fat diet, and a lack of daily exercise all increase the chances of breast cancer to some degree.

You can take steps to reduce the chances of developing breast cancer. Limit your alcohol intake, limit fat intake while maintaining a healthy weight, and be physically active. Mammograms should be yearly once a woman reaches

40 years of age. All women should see a doctor for a clinical breast exam along with their yearly pap smear, perform monthly self breast exams, and see their doctor immediately for any changes in the breast or underarm area.

Take control of your health!

Excellent information and risk assessment tools are available. You may want to check out:

www.mayoclinic.com

www.cancer.gov/bcrisktool