

# Health...

## Untangling Breast Cancer Confusion

Breast Cancer affects one in nine women in their lifetime and causes 12,000 deaths a year. The earlier the diagnosis, the greater the chance of survival. Yet recent research has shown that women still remain unaware of the majority of the signals, clinging to the myths surrounding the disease, and are confused about the screening process.

Here are the breast health basics that every woman should know.

### Risk Factors

- Gender - Men only constitute 300 out of the 44,000 cases diagnosed last year.
- Age - 6 in 10 women are unaware that as age increases, so does the risk of breast cancer. 80% of all sufferers are in the 50 - 70 age group. If you are in this age bracket, you must attend a routine mammogram at least every three years. As GPs often do not talk to women over 70 about screening, many ignore the risk, but it does continue to augment. Encourage any women you know over 70 to make mammogram appointments regularly.
- Family History - Breast cancer is known to have a hereditary influence, but the part that genetics play is often exaggerated. BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes only account for 5% of cases. You should be more wary if a relative is diagnosed under 40, with cancer in both breasts, a male relative is affected, two relatives are diagnosed under 60 or three relatives at any age. You may want to consider regular mammograms or genetic screening. The National Institute for Clinical Excellence now recommends annual checks for some women in their forties with a family history of the disease.
- Lifestyle - Three alcoholic drinks a day could increase the risk of breast cancer by as much as 30%. Obesity is also a factor. Unlike the other factors, you can diminish these risks by reducing alcohol consumption, increasing exercise and eating healthily to maintain a satisfactory weight. It has been suggested that by keeping-off ten pounds between 18 - 30 you could cut your chances of developing breast cancer by as much as 65%. It is also debated that a soy-based diet, or one that substitutes olive oil in cooking may go some way to help inhibit breast cancer growth.

### Most Common Myths

Many rumoured links with breast cancer have not been substantiated by scientific evidence, causing much panic unnecessarily. These include:

- The Pill - the risk is minute;
- Smoking;
- Antiperspirants;
- Underwired bras;
- Bruising the breast area;



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### Breast Checks

Women themselves or their partners detect nine out of ten cases, so it is essential to be aware of potential symptoms. Remember that many of the signs are not exclusive to breast cancer, nor do they necessarily point towards you having formed the disease; many women have naturally lumpy breasts or find changes occur during the menstrual cycle or menopause. The key is to be really familiar with what is normal for you, and therefore be able to pick up on any changes in the look or feel of your breasts.

- Lumps - The most common way that the cancer is first detected, however 80% of lumps prove to be benign cysts or calcification due to bruising, hormonal changes or infection. Nevertheless should you find an abnormal lump in the breast or area under and around the armpits, which doesn't go away after your period, it is imperative that you get it checked out immediately.
- Nipple - Inversion can once again be standard, but if this is atypical for you and you notice a pulling inward it is worth being examined professionally. Check for bloodstained discharge, a rash on or around the nipple and changes in its' position or shape.
- Skin - Look out for puckering or dimpling.
- Size and Shape - Many women have one breast larger than the other, but be aware of changes in the shape, appearance, symmetry or feel beyond the usual differences or cyclical alterations. For example, one might become larger or lower than the other.
- Pain - Two-thirds of women experience mastalgia to some degree, but constant pain in one part of the breast or armpit should be considered further.

Breast cancer is no longer a death sentence. Survival rates have increased by 18% in the past ten years to two-thirds of diagnosed cases. Scientific advances have dramatically improved treatment and a move away from aggressive surgery has diminished some of the detrimental psychological effects. Early detection is key, however, every woman ought to become more breast aware and attend regular screenings which is fundamental in helping to increase the survival rate.

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