



OCTOBER IS BREAST CANCER AWARENESS MONTH

Written by Dr. Kimberley King

What Is Breast Cancer?

Breast cancer refers to a condition in which cells comprising breast tissue are abnormal and experience uncontrolled growth and proliferation. These abnormal, rapidly growing cells form what is known as a malignant (cancerous) tumour (abnormal swollen mass of tissue) usually in the lobules or the milk producing glands or ducts (areas via which milk passes to the nipple). These abnormal cells may then spread to other parts of the body for example underarm lymph nodes, bone or other internal organs, resulting in similar cancerous masses in those areas. The more the cancerous tissue spreads the more dangerous the condition will be often progressing to becoming fatal.

There are different types and stages of breast cancer and this is based on the cancer's characteristic such as size, response to oestrogen and degree of spread to other parts of the body. Typically stage 0-1 are confined to the breast and are more easily treated whereas stage 4 refers to cancers of fatal potential which have started to spread. The stage and type determines the course of treatment course and outcomes.

WHAT ABOUT SCREENING?

Screening, early detection and prevention are our most powerful weapons available to fight breast cancer in our population. Monthly routine breast self examinations, a procedure known as a mammogram (a specialised x-ray of the breast) in combination with physical examination by a physician are effective means of identifying breast cancer. Often an ultrasound may be used to confirm any suspicions by the physician.

Typically it is advised that women have an annual mammogram after the age of 40 yrs and even earlier, if there is an identified genetic risk, for example a first degree relative (mother or sister) who has breast cancer.

ADDRESSING PREVENTION

Large studies reveal between 1 in 7 to 1 in 8 women will develop breast cancer in their lifetime; thus female gender is a salient risk factor. Approximately 60% of breast cancer patients have no identifiable risk factors other than female gender and age (risk increases as you get older).

To address prevention it is important to note the key identified risk factors for breast cancer development, especially those considered to be modifiable ie. Those which can change to reduce the occurrence. Anything that increases the chance of developing breast cancer is termed a risk factor.

Typically it is advised that women have an annual mammogram after the age of 40 yrs and even earlier, if there is an identified genetic risk, for example a first degree relative (mother or sister) who has breast cancer.

WHAT ABOUT GENETIC RISK?

Breast Cancer is a devastating disease which impacts not only the patient but their families and society as a whole. Addressing modifiable risk factors and instituting lifestyle changes that can reduce occurrence will be critical in reducing the impact of this potentially deadly condition.

Seeking help with regards to reducing your modifiable risk factors may help us see a day when breast cancer no longer has such a detrimental grip on our society.

THE FOLLOWING IDENTIFIED PREDISPOSING CHARACTERISTICS PROVIDE A BASIS FOR THE PREVENTATIVE APPROACH:



WEIGHT

Obesity and being overweight; obese and overweight women have a higher risk than women who are normal weight.



DIET

Unhealthy diet ie. one high in processed meats and carbohydrates and low in fruit, vegetable and water intake.who are normal weight.



DRINKING & SMOKING

Alcohol use above recommended levels and tobacco smoking.



HORMONE

Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and the used of oral contraception. (of note is that this risk is mitigated after 10 years of cessation.)



INACTIVITY

Inactivity and sedentary lifestyle



PREGNANCY

Pregnancy at an advanced age or having no children.

WHAT ABOUT GENETIC RISK?

Hereditary breast cancer represents approximately 5-10 % of cases and there is evidence that a women's risk is nearly doubled if she has a first degree relative (eg mother or sister) with breast cancer, and such women may significantly benefit from robust screening. Even though caucasian women have the highest incidence, Black women are more likely to die of their condition than any other ethnic group. Below age 45yrs breast cancer is also more prevalent in black women.

HOW IS BREAST CANCER TREATED

Today modern medicine has provided many diverse and effective approaches to breast cancer treatment, however some of these interventions may have undesirable side effects. Breast cancer treatment is dependent on the type, severity and profile of the patient. It can range from surgical intervention to radiation or chemotherapy. Breast cancer therapies have even extended to include novel therapies which utilise the body's own immune system. Any conventional medical therapy instituted should be augmented by positive lifestyle modification including changes to diet and behaviour, which have been proven to improve outcomes.

Significant signs you should tell your doctor about

It is important to catch breast cancer in its earliest stages to increase the likelihood that treatment will be effective. Below are some notable changes to watch out for:



Swelling of all or part of the breast.



Consistent skin irritation or rash on the breast.



Nipple pain or overall breast pain.



A discharge from the nipple (other than breast milk).



A lump in the actual breast or in the underarm area; of note here is that most breast lumps are not cancerous but do warrant further investigations.

