

Keep the Faith

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Introduction:

Breast cancer can affect both the young and old. While commoner in older women, it can strike women in their prime: young working women with families to support and children to look after. It can devastate a family since the woman of the house is often the foundation of a home, playing different roles viz. of a daughter, mother and wife, and increasingly also the breadwinner for the family.

Incidence:

Unfortunately, the incidence of breast cancer is increasing in India. The lifetime risk of developing breast cancer is 1 in 27 women. This is far lower than in western countries where the risk is approximately 1 in every 9 women. However, a worrying trend has been noted. Breast cancer incidence is increasing in the major cities of Mumbai, Bangalore, Delhi and Chennai over the last decade. While cervical cancer remains the commonest cancer affecting women in India, breast cancer has overtaken it to become the commonest cancer in women living in cities like Mumbai.

Causes:

The reason for this increase has been loosely attributed to “westernisation or urbanisation” of the population living in the cities. This vaguely implicates changing socio-economic parameters like diet, late marriages, late bearing of first child or not bearing children, increasing number of single women and lack of breast feeding. However, the exact reason remains unknown.

A family history of breast or ovarian cancer, especially which occurs in a mother or sister at a young age, does increase the risk of an individual. Nevertheless, it is important to note that not all relatives will develop breast cancer as there are many factors which modify this risk. In fact, only as few as 7 % of all breast cancer cases are attributable to a significant family history.

Prevention:

Weight gain in postmenopausal women and increased alcohol consumption are preventable or modifiable factors associated with an increase in the likelihood of developing breast cancer. Increase in weight gain just before menopause appears to have a significant effect on the risk of developing breast cancer, and it seems prudent to have a normal body mass

index and minimise the chances of becoming obese. Nutritional supplements in the form of vitamin C, iron and B carotene may be helpful. There may be a moderate protective effect with a diet rich in vegetables however the effect of fruit, fibre and meat remains inconclusive for the moment.

Signs and symptoms: Early diagnosis:

While there has been an increase in the level of awareness of breast cancer, it is still not detected early since it may not cause any symptoms at this stage. The common warning signs to watch for are that of a lump in the breast or arm pit which may be painless, a change in the appearance of the skin of the breast, nipple or areola, puckering of skin over the breast, discharge from the nipple or even vague symptoms like discomfort which persists over a period of time.

What is important to remember is to examine ones breast while having a bath or to perform a more formal "breast self examination" once a week. This increases awareness, allows one to become familiar with the texture of the breast and may allow early detection of small lumps. In case a change is noticed it is advisable to seek a doctor's opinion.

Mammography

For diagnosis, a mammogram (an x ray of the breast) is often advised along with an ultra sound examination of the breast. Recently doubts have been raised regarding the use of mammography. However, it remains an effective modality for the early diagnosis of breast cancer. Like all technologies it has its short comings. It is less effective in dense breasts which are often seen in young women. It is important to remember that a mammogram may miss 10-15% of breast cancers and hence whenever there is any doubt it is imperative to seek the opinion of a doctor. MRI scans of the breast are being increasingly performed, and are today considered more sensitive than mammograms for detection of breast cancer. However they have their own problems and hence are recommended only in certain situations.

Diagnosis

The presence of breast cancer is only confirmed after the pathologist sees the presence of cancer cells. These cells can often be collected by a simple aspiration of the lump in the doctor's clinic called "FNAC". Alternatively a biopsy has to be performed where a small piece of the lump is sampled.

Treatment

Once a cancer is diagnosed the next step is to find out its extent or spread in the body. This is called "staging" and is done with the help of certain investigations and scans. The schedule of treatment is decided based on the stage of the disease. The treatment options include surgery, radiation therapy and drug therapy which may be chemotherapy, hormonal treatment or targeted treatment in different combinations. Each cancer is different and the treatment is determined on the specific characteristics obtained from staging and detailed pathological characterisation of the tumour tissue by the pathologist.

Misconceptions

There are many misconceptions regarding breast cancer treatment. A common misconception is that the breast has to be removed once it is affected by cancer. This is untrue. It is possible to preserve the breast and treat the cancer effectively in certain cases. This so called "Breast Preserving Treatment" has proved effective over the last 25 years.

Even if the breast has to be removed it is possible to reconstruct the breast either immediately or later, depending on the wishes of the individual.

Another misconception revolves around the side effects associated with chemotherapy and radiation therapy. With advances in therapy it is now possible to receive these treatments with minimal side effects. Unfortunately it is often well wishers, friends and family who unknowingly scare a patient with stories they have heard. It is extremely important to have a positive attitude through out treatment, more so since it may last many months.

A commonly asked question is about the effectiveness of alternative therapy. This is something that each patient should discuss with her doctor.

Life after breast cancer:

Life after breast cancer can be absolutely normal. With modern treatment it is often possible to live an active, useful, and long life. An excellent recent example of how one can look normal and return to an active life is provided by Kylie Minogue, the Australian singer who has returned to strenuous concert performances despite being struck by breast cancer in the prime of life and undergoing surgery, chemotherapy and radiation therapy.