

Think

OCTOBER 2020

Pink

A supplement to *Whidbey Weekly*

HOPE

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STRENGTH

*Breast Cancer
Awareness Month*

DID YOU KNOW?

Women diagnosed with breast cancer who want to speak with someone who has survived the disease can do so thanks to a unique program sponsored by the American Cancer Society. The Reach to Recovery program from the ACS connects current cancer patients with breast cancer survivors via an online chat. Patients, regardless of where they are in their cancer journeys, can connect with volunteers for one-on-one support. Volunteers can help patients cope with treatment and side effects while also offering advice on speaking with friends and family, working while receiving treatment and more. Even people facing a possible breast cancer diagnosis can sign up. The program works by asking patients and volunteers to join the program and create profiles on the Reach to Recovery website (www.reach.cancer.org). Patients then look for a match by searching volunteer profiles, filtering through suggested matches and sending an online chat request to volunteers. Patients and volunteers can then schedule a chat and discuss any concerns patients may have. Volunteers with the Reach to Recovery program are breast cancer survivors who have been trained by the ACS to provide peer-to-peer support to people facing a breast cancer diagnosis. Volunteers can provide support to patients, but are prohibited from offering medical advice. More information about the Reach to Recovery program, including how to join as a patient or volunteer, is available at www.reach.cancer.org.



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The *risk factors* for breast cancer



No two women are the same. But when it comes to breast cancer, women from all walks of life share various risk factors for a disease that the World Health Organization indicates is the most frequent cancer among women.

Risk factors are anything that affects the likelihood that individuals will get a certain disease. In regard to breast cancer, the American Breast Cancer Foundation notes that various factors, some that result from lifestyle choices and others that are not changeable, can increase a woman's risk of developing breast cancer. Recognizing these risk factors can help women make any necessary changes and even highlight the importance of routine cancer screenings that can detect the presence of the disease in its earliest, most treatable stages.

LIFESTYLE-RELATED RISK FACTORS

The ABCF notes that certain habits or behaviors can increase a woman's risk for breast cancer. But the good news is that women who understand the link between certain habits or behaviors and breast cancer can avoid those behaviors to decrease their risk of developing the disease. According to Breastcancer.org, the following are some habits, behaviors or lifestyle choices that can increase a woman's risk for breast cancer.

Alcohol consumption: Breastcancer.org notes that researchers have uncovered links between the consumption of alcoholic beverages and hormone-receptor-positive breast cancer. One study found that women who consume three alcoholic beverages per week have a 15 percent higher risk of developing breast cancer than women who don't drink at all. And while research into the connection is limited, a 2009 study found

a link between alcohol consumption and breast cancer recurrence.

Sedentary lifestyle: Exercise consumes and controls blood sugar and limits blood levels of insulin growth factor. That's an important connection, as insulin growth factor can affect how breast cells grow and behave. A sedentary lifestyle also can increase a woman's risk of being obese, which the ABCF notes is a risk factor for breast cancer among postmenopausal women.

Smoking: Smoking has long been linked to cancer, and Breastcancer.org notes that smoking has been linked to a higher risk of breast cancer in younger, premenopausal women.

UNCHANGABLE RISK FACTORS

Unfortunately, many risk factors for breast cancer are beyond women's control. For example, the ABCF notes that roughly two out of three invasive breast cancers occur in women age 55 and older. Women cannot change their ages, but recognizing the link between age and breast cancer risk is important, as such a recognition may compel more women 55 and older to prioritize cancer screening.

Gender and family history are two additional unchangeable risk factors for breast cancer. Women are much more likely to get breast cancer than men. In addition, Breastcancer.org notes that between 5 and 10 percent of breast cancers are believed to be caused by abnormal genes that are passed from parent to child.

Women are not helpless in the fight against breast cancer. Knowledge of breast cancer, including its various risk factors, is a great weapon against it as women look to reduce their risk of developing the disease.



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Early warning signs for breast cancer



Breast cancer affects millions of women across the globe every year. According to the World Health Organization, breast cancer is the most frequent cancer among women, affecting 2.1 million women each year. As daunting as that may seem, the WHO also notes that early diagnosis can greatly reduce a woman's risk of dying from breast cancer.

Women can be proactive in the fight against breast cancer by learning to identify early warning signs of the disease. The nonprofit breast cancer advocacy organization Susan G. Komen® notes that the warning signs for breast cancer are not the same for all women, but the most common signs include a change in the look or feel of the breast or a change in the look or feel of the nipple. A discharge from the nipple is another common warning sign of breast cancer.

Physical changes in the breast can vary, but Susan G. Komen® advises women who notice these changes to bring them to the attention of their physicians immediately:

- Lump, hard knot or thickening inside of the breast or underarm area
- Change in the size or shape of the breast
- Swelling, warmth, redness or darkening of the breast
- Dimpling or puckering of the skin
- Women with breast cancer also may notice physical changes in their nipples, including:
 - Itchy, scaly sore or rash on the nipple
 - Pulling in of the nipple or other parts of the breast

It's important that women recognize that physical changes in their breasts are not necessarily indicative of breast cancer. In fact, the American Breast Cancer Foundation notes that not all lumps in the breast cause cancer and that many such lumps are benign. Fibroadenomas and intraductal papillomas are examples of benign lumps, though it's important to note that even benign conditions such as these may put women at greater risk of developing breast cancer.

Susan G. Komen® notes that breast tissue naturally has a lumpy texture. If lumpiness can be felt throughout the breast and it feels like your other breast, then it's likely that this is just the normal texture of your breasts. However, women concerned by a lump or lumpy texture are urged to discuss those concerns with their physicians immediately.

Discharge from the nipple is another potential sign of breast cancer, but Susan G. Komen® notes that such discharge is rarely a sign of cancer. Discharges that occur without squeezing the nipple, occur in only one breast or are bloody or clear are potentially indicative of more serious conditions, including breast cancer.

Breast cancer is a formidable foe. But women who arm themselves with knowledge of the disease, including its early warning signs, are in better position to overcome it.

Fight Breast Cancer with Early Detection

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COVID-19 and breast cancer *guidelines*



The novel coronavirus COVID-19 first appeared in late 2019 and has changed life for the foreseeable future. While many people are quick to focus on the ways COVID-19 has impacted their abilities to shop, visit with friends and relatives or travel, the virus has made life especially difficult for people with preexisting health conditions.

Medical News Today reports that the symptoms of COVID-19 may be more severe for breast cancer patients. Furthermore, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention notes that undergoing cancer treatment can weaken the immune system, further increasing a person's vulnerability to infection. Specifically, targeted therapies, chemotherapy and radiation can weaken the immune system and compromise its ability to fight off the coronavirus. Furthermore, these treatments also may cause lung problems that can exacerbate COVID-19 symptoms, particularly among breast cancer patients whose cancer has metastasized to the lungs.

In April 2020, new guidelines for the prioritization and treatment of breast cancer patients during the COVID-19 pandemic were released, compiled by a group of U.S. medical organizations, including the National Accreditation Program for Breast Centers, the American College of Radiology and the Comprehensive Cancer Network. At hospitals where resources and staff have become limited due to COVID-19 treatment efforts, doctors have had to define which breast cancer patients need urgent care and which can have delayed or alternative treatments. These measures can help balance maintaining positive survival outcomes as well as reducing

risk of exposure to the virus, according to the American Society of Breast Surgeons.

Breast cancer patients have been broken down into priority levels of A, B and C for urgency of care.

- Priority A: A patient has conditions that are immediately life-threatening or require urgent treatment.
- Priority B: A patient has conditions that don't require immediate treatment, but he or she should begin treatment before the end of the pandemic.
- Priority C: A patient has conditions for which treatment can be safely put on hold.

Breast cancer patients are further urged to take extra caution in their daily activities to help reduce the risk of contracting COVID-19. That means always wearing a mask or another face covering when interacting with other people. This advice may be applicable even if a six-foot distance can be maintained. Wash hands frequently, especially when coming in from public places. If possible, ask a friend or family member to do your shopping or run errands for you to limit exposure to other people and crowds.

Breast cancer patients may have to discuss the possibility of altering or delaying treatment for breast cancer with their oncologists because of increased risk factors presented by COVID-19. Together, patients and doctors can work to keep breast cancer patients as healthy as possible.



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Is 3D *mammography* right for you?



Mammograms take images of breast tissue to determine the presence of abnormalities, including lumps. Women may undergo traditional, 2D mammograms, but increasingly many healthcare facilities are now employing 3D technology because it can provide clearer pictures.

A 3D mammogram, also called digital tomosynthesis, takes several different X-rays of the breasts and combines those images to establish a three-dimensional picture. The Mayo Clinic says that a 3D mammogram is typically used to search for breast cancer in people who may have no outward signs or symptoms. It also may be used to help diagnose the cause of a breast mass or nipple discharge. Doctors may suggest 3D imaging to get a better look at any growths or help identify the source of any symptoms a person may be concerned about.

Two-dimensional mammograms are still the industry standard. The 3D versions are obtained in a similar fashion by pressing the breasts between two imaging plates. Rather than just taking images from the sides and top to bottom, the 3D version will take multiple angles to make a digital recreation of the breast. *Medical News Today* says this enables doctors to look at small, individual sections of the breast tissue that may be as thin as just a single millimeter.

A study published in the journal *JAMA Oncology* says cancer detection rates are higher in people who do 3D imaging over time. Three-dimensional mammograms can be useful for women with dense breast tissue or those at higher risk for breast cancer. Although experts at MD Anderson Cancer Center advise any woman who needs a mammogram to get the 3D version. However, 3D mammography may not be covered by all insurance plans. It's important to note that a 3D mammogram releases the same amount of radiation as a traditional mammogram. It is of no greater risk to the patient, and it is approved by the Food and Drug Administration. Also of note, because 3D mammograms produce more images, it may take a radiologist a little longer to read one than it would a 2D mammogram. Three-dimensional mammograms are an option for women screening for breast cancer.

BREAST CANCER SCREENING

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The vital role of a *cancer support network*



The moment a person is diagnosed with cancer can elicit a variety of emotions. Fear of what's to come is a common reaction to such a diagnosis, and some people may feel alone upon learning they have cancer. But no cancer patient should face their diagnosis and treatment alone. In fact, a strong support network can be vital to patients' recoveries. According to Weill Cornell Medicine, recent changes in the healthcare industry have shifted the burden of care from the hospital to the home. That underscores the importance of a strong support network. Many of the challenges cancer patients face in the months after diagnosis will be new, and patients can expect a range of emotions. According to Breast Cancer Now, a charitable organization that funds one-third of breast cancer research in the United Kingdom, women may experience emotions such as shock, anger, disbelief, anxiety, and sadness after being diagnosed with breast cancer. Having loved ones there to help them make sense of those emotions and stay positive as they navigate their way through the treatment process is essential.

In addition to providing emotional support, loved ones of breast cancer patients may need to take on additional roles as they help their friends or family members face the challenges that lay ahead. Because of the industry changes noted by Weill Cornell Medicine, cancer caregivers and support networks may need to prepare themselves to take on the following roles, each of which is vital to cancer patients' survival.

Monitor the disease: Support networks may need to keep track of how their loved ones' disease is progressing and if there are any complications from treatment.

Manage symptoms: Breastcancer.org notes that treatment causes severe side effects in many women. Such side effects may include nausea/vomiting, diarrhea, constipation, pain,

arm swelling, shortness of breath, and skin irritation. Thankfully, most of these side effects can be treated. In addition, Breastcancer.org notes that most side effects ease up after treatment is completed. In the meantime, support networks may need to help patients manage those symptoms, performing a host of tasks to make their loved ones' lives easier. For example, patients experiencing shortness of breath may be incapable of performing chores around the house. In such instances, members of a support network can tackle those chores

until their loved one bounces back.

Administer medication: Breast cancer patients may be too overwhelmed to handle their own medications, so support networks can take over this important responsibility for them.

Assist with personal care: Some patients may experience fatigue after treatment. In such instances, support networks can help patients maintain their personal hygiene. Support networks can be vital to helping cancer patients overcome their disease and navigate their way through successful treatment regimens.

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