Breast Cancer, What You Should Know

Breast cancer is one of the most common types of cancer in women. It is the second leading cause of death for all women. About 1 in 8 women will get this form of cancer in their lifetime.

The probability that breast cancer will return after treatment is directly related to the stage of its malignancy. This means how advanced the cancer is before it is found and treated. If breast cancer is found and treated early, before the cancer has spread to the lymph nodes, your chance for survival is much better. Delays in diagnosing or treating breast cancer can result in spread of the cancer. This happens when warning signs are ignored and proper measures for diagnosis or treatment are not taken. When breast cancer spreads beyond the breast, to other parts of the body, staging is done in order to find out the extent of the cancer and to give the best treatment available.

Today there is a better chance of survival (*prognosis*) in the treatment of breast cancer. In the past 20 to 30 years, the diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer has greatly improved. There are more options for the type of surgery available (not just radical breast removal (*mastectomy*) and removal of lymph nodes in the armpit). There are also improved medicines, chemotherapy, radiation therapy, and breast reconstruction. These innovations have improved the survival rate and have helped with complications of breast cancer that were present in the past. Radiation, chemotherapy, and medicines may be used before or after surgery to shrink the tumor, kill any remaining cancer cells, and to prevent spreading and recurrence of the cancer.

TYPES OF BREAST CANCER INCLUDE:

- In situ. Contained in the tumor and has not spread.
- Invasive. Cancer has spread outside the tumor.
- Inflammatory. The whole breast is red (*inflamed*), painful, and swollen (rare).
- Paget's disease. Starts in the nipple and spreads to the areola (*dark area around nipple*) (rare).
- Breast cancer in the milk ducts.
- Breast cancer in milk lobules.

Males can get breast cancer, but it is very rare.

The following are steps that should be taken to avoid a bad outcome with a breast problem:

- Perform regular breast examinations to identify lumps and bumps. Self breast examination should be done after a menstrual period is over. If you are not having menstrual periods, do the examination on the first day of every month. If you find a lump, notify your caregiver. Make sure you are given a reason for the lump and that your caregiver definitely knows what is causing the lump.
- All lumps should be evaluated thoroughly by ultrasound, mammogram (*breast X-ray*), MRI, biopsied, and/or removed and examined for cancer.
- If you are told you have a breast infection, make sure you follow up with your caregiver until it gets better and goes away.
- If you are told a tumor is benign (*non-cancerous*), question the diagnosis and ask for a biopsy to make sure.
- All tumors should be removed and examined for cancer.
- Do not disregard sharp pains in your breast. Make sure you have an answer for what is causing the pain and follow up properly.
- If you have signs of pulling in (*retraction*) of your nipple, make sure you understand the reason for this and that proper studies are done.
- If you have signs of discharge from your nipple, especially blood, make sure you are told the reason for this and that proper tests are done.
- If a needle aspiration biopsy is done and is negative, make sure you know when to follow up with this, and when repeat testing should be done. Get a second opinion if necessary.
- Do not rely only on mammograms. Be sure to have regular self examinations and physical breast

examinations by your caregiver.

- Have a mammogram done on a regular basis, or as recommended. The American Cancer Society has guidelines based on age and risk factors that may be present.
- If there are findings from your mammogram, make sure you have the appropriate follow up. Make sure you know when additional testing needs to be done.

You should know that:

- Radiation from mammograms does not cause cancer or other problems to the breast, skin, heart, or lungs.
- Other screening tests for the breast are ultrasound and MRI (*magnetic resonance imaging*).
- There are medicines available that may help prevent breast cancer or help prevent recurrence in women at high risk, 35 years old or older:
  - Tamoxifen.
  - Raloxifene.
  - Herceptin.

These medicines block estrogen hormone from getting into the tumor.

Sometimes the ovaries will be removed to decrease estrogen and/or progesterone hormone production, which may stimulate the growth, recurrence, or spread of breast cancer.

RISK FACTORS FOR DEVELOPING BREAST CANCER

There are certain conditions and circumstances that place some women at risk for developing breast cancer. If you have any or several of these risks, you should be aware of them and take extra precautions to take better care of yourself. Some of these risk factors include:

- Previous history of breast cancer.
- Family history of breast cancer.
- Abnormal genes present in your body (BRCA 1, BRCA 2, and HER-2). If they are present, there is a 25-50% chance of developing breast cancer.
- Calcium deposits (*calcifications*) seen on your mammogram.
- Starting your menstrual periods before age 12 (*early menarche*).
- Late menopause, at age 55 or older.
- Heavy radiation exposure to the chest.
- Cancer of the uterus, ovary, or intestine.
- Drinking too much alcohol.
- Never having a baby or breast-feeding.
- Taking too much hormone treatment for too long.
- Being very tall.
- Breast cancer is seen more often in Jewish women.
- Breast cancer is seen more often in obese women. Be physically active, and eat nutritious foods and drinks to maintain a healthy weight.
- Presence of estrogen and/or progesterone receptor cells in the breast.
- Smoking.

Low dose birth control pills and fibrocystic disease of the breast are not thought to cause breast cancer.

FINDING OUT THE RESULTS OF YOUR TEST

When you have breast testing done, not all test results are available during your visit. If your test results are not back during the visit, make an appointment with your caregiver to find out the results. Do not assume everything is normal if you have not heard from your caregiver or the medical facility. It is important for you to follow up on all of your test results.

Research to develop new medicines, procedures, and combination of treatments is constantly being done to help

improve prevention, treatment, and to reduce recurrence of breast cancer.

For more information, contact the American Cancer Society at 1-800-227-2345 or www.cancer.org.

Document Released: 03/28/2007 Document Re-Released: 01/09/2011
ExitCare® Patient Information ©2011 ExitCare, LLC.