

Risk factors for breast cancer

"What are the signs and symptoms to look for?" "How can this cancer be prevented?" and "how dangerous is this cancer?"

Breast cancer is very 'dangerous'. It is the number-one cause of female cancer deaths in Jamaica, and the number-three cause of female cancer deaths worldwide. Breast cancer is mostly a disease of older women as 80 per cent of cases occur after the age of 50. This figure does not, however, excuse the rest of the female population for if a female has had a close relative with this disease, or with ovarian cancer, they are significantly more 'at risk' of the disease than the rest of the female population. Other factors, alongside 'age' which predispose a woman to breast cancer and need to be considered in breast cancer prevention are:

- Family history of breast cancer.** If a family member has had this disease, then all closely related female family members are at an increased risk of this cancer.
- Genetics.** Women who carry the BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes are very likely to develop breast cancer or ovarian cancer. (Testing for these genes is not available in Jamaica.)
- History of benign breast lumps.** Women who have had any lumps at all in their breasts are more likely to later develop breast cancer.
- Estrogen exposure.** Women who start periods early or enter menopause late are exposed to a greater amount of the female estrogen hormone which 'feeds' many female breast cancers.
- Obese and overweight women** are at a greater risk for breast cancer because there is a higher level of estrogen in these women.
- Repeated radiation exposure** to X-rays or CT scans can slightly raise the risk of breast cancer.
- Prolonged hormone replacement therapy** in pre- and post-menopausal women is also associated with an increased risk of breast cancer.
- Alcohol consumption.** Women who drink significant amounts of alcohol are at an increased risk of breast cancer.
- Certain types of jobs** associated with the canning of foods and the use of automotive plastics in manufacturing are associated with increased incidence of breast cancer.
- Breast cosmetic implants** are also associated with a higher occurrence of breast cancer.

Any woman who has a family history of this disease should begin yearly screening for the disease at a time which is five years in age, earlier than the age at which the relative was when first diagnosed. Some of the signs and symptoms of breast cancer are:

- Breast lump.** Pitting or redness of the breast skin, somewhat like an orange fruit skin.
- Pain, lump or swelling** in the armpits.
- Sudden increase** in the breast size in an adult female.
- Rash** around the nipple.
- Bloody nipple discharge.**
- Changes in the appearance** of the nipple, e.g. nipple inversion.

Prevention What we can do to prevent breast cancer is mainly to live healthy lives. Avoid alcohol and stress. Exercise regularly, at least five days a week if possible. Eat a healthy, well-balanced diet. Avoid saturated fats found in animal oil and meats, and increase dietary fish oil found in tuna, salmon and sardines. Limit hormone use when there is a possible breast cancer risk. Maintain a healthy body weight. Obesity and even overweight are associated with increased incidence of breast cancer. Breast cancer screening (Mammogram and breast ultra-sound tests). Women should discuss when to begin these individually with their physicians but, as a rule, have your first mammogram at age 40. Women who breastfeed are less likely to develop breast cancer. Recent indications are that the use of low-dose Aspirin, where possible, may help prevent breast cancer occurrence and slow growth of breast cancer cells. This is still under investigation.

How serious is breast cancer? Take a look at the statistics: Breast cancer is the second-leading cause of cancer death in women worldwide. The chance that a woman will die from breast cancer is one in 36, or about three per cent. Breast cancer is the number one cause of female cancer deaths in Jamaica. Although breast self-examination does lead to more tests on breasts than needed, it is better to be safe than sorry. All females, beginning at child-bearing age, should examine their breasts once a month and should see their physician for examination of any out-of-the-ordinary swelling noticed.