

Breast cancer - prevention is the cure

Breast cancer is the commonest cancer in women. Breast Cancer Awareness Month is once again here.

From its inception in America in 1985, it has focused on the early detection of breast cancer, mainly by regular mammogram testing, as the most effective way to fight this disease. Is this the best approach to breast cancer? Cancer research indicates that by the time a breast cancer is detected by mammogram, the disease has already been present for about eight years. In my opinion, cancer is not a thing to wait for, then treat. Winning the war against cancer means preventing cancer. Breast cancer can be prevented. Today, the chance of a woman developing breast cancer, at some time in her life, is about one in eight. Back in 1950, the risk was one in 20. Question: What has changed so dramatically? Answer: The way we live, our modern environment and how we now treat our bodies. Medical research shows breast cancer is linked to lifestyle and environmental factors that can be controlled. The recent expensive trend to search for a breast-cancer gene is of limited value. The causes of breast cancer are more than 90 per cent environmental and less than 10 per cent genetic.

Causes of breast cancer The evidence is overwhelming that the female sex hormone, oestrogen, is closely related to the development of breast cancer. Oestrogen encourages the cells in the breast to multiply rapidly and increases the presence of abnormal cells. Most types of breast cancer are called oestrogen-dependent cancers. The use of oral contraceptives and oestrogen-replacement therapy, especially with early and prolonged usage can cause breast cancer. Repeated mammograms before the menopause: Data from the National Cancer Institute in the US indicates that, among women under 35, mammography could cause 75 cases of breast cancer for every 15 case it identifies. Some non-hormonal prescription drugs such as some blood-pressure medicines, antibiotics, tranquillisers, antidepressants, cholesterol-lowering drugs, and the very drugs used to treat cancer itself can also result in women developing the disease. Indeed, patients on chemotherapy have an increased risk of developing other types of cancer.

Diet environmental factors A diet high in animal fats contaminated with cancer-causing and oestrogen-like chemicals. Low dietary intake of fruit, vegetables and fibre. Exposure in the home or workplace to chemicals such as cleansers, aerosols, air fresheners, pesticides, or pollution from urban traffic, industrial and chemical factories are risk factors too.

Lifestyle factors: Inactivity, obesity and a sedentary lifestyle. Alcohol and tobacco, especially with early and excessive use. Prolonged use of dark hair dyes. Prolonged stress, when poorly managed. Low vitamin-D levels associated with lack of exposure to sunshine. In addition to avoiding the risks listed above, some key lifestyle recommendations should be strongly publicised during BCAM and, indeed, the entire year.

Eat anti-cancer foods Food can protect against cancer. Aim to consume seven or more servings of vegetables and fruit daily. Cruciferous vegetables such as broccoli, cauliflower and cabbage are particularly important. They help eliminate excess oestrogen from the body. Despite propaganda to the contrary, soy protects against breast cancer. It contains substances called selective estrogen receptor modulators. They block oestrogen receptors that relate to breast cancer. I recommend 25 grams of good-quality soy protein daily for breast-cancer prevention. Green tea, turmeric and pomegranate also have cancer-protective properties.

Exercise & correct obesity A 2008 study, published in the British Journal of Sports Medicine, indicates that women who exercised regularly reduced their risk of breast cancer by 25 per cent. The Georgetown University research showed that African-American women who vigorously exercised two hours per week reduced their risk by 64 per cent. Moderate exercise, such as brisk walking, cut the risk by 17 per cent. Exercise may prevent breast cancer by reducing obesity, stimulating the immune system and by helping to detoxify the body. Obese menopausal women have a 150 per cent higher risk for breast cancer than those of ideal weight. The risk is reduced when a woman avoids obesity in her adult life, especially after menopause. Experts believe oestrogen produced by fat cells is the probable cause of this increased risk.

Get sunshine Sun exposure will elevate your levels of vitamin D. Research from Columbia University, New York, demonstrated a very significant relationship between a woman's vitamin D blood level and her risk of breast cancer. The higher her vitamin-D levels, the lower her risk of breast cancer. Vitamin D is more a hormone than a vitamin. It helps to regulate other hormones. Black women, in particular, are quite commonly deficient in vitamin-D. Here is one sobering report: Women diagnosed with breast cancer who are deficient in vitamin D are 75 per cent more likely to die from the disease than women with adequate vitamin-D levels. Ladies, don't just resort to mammograms. Protect your breasts by changing your lifestyles. Awareness is good. Prevention is even better.