

What You Should Know About Breast Cancer

Breast Cancer

Breast cancer is the most common cancer affecting women in Trinidad and Tobago. Women have a one in eight lifetime risk of getting this disease, which causes one in three of all female cancers. Breast cancer is not one single disease; there are several types of breast cancers, which can be diagnosed at different stages of development and can grow at different rates. This means that women can be given different treatments, depending on what will work best for them. Earlier diagnosis and better treatments mean that more and more women are now living longer and fuller lives after breast cancer.

Defining Risk

Health risks are often described in terms of risk factors. A risk factor is anything that may increase your chance of developing a disease. Established breast cancer risk factors are supported by a body of research with conclusive evidence that is confirmed by different sources and studies. This means that established risk factors have been linked to the development of breast cancer. While risk factors are established by conclusive research, they cannot be seen as rules or guarantees. On the other hand, some women who are diagnosed with breast cancer have no identifiable risk factors other than being a woman. This tells us that there's much more to be discovered about breast cancer, its causes, and what we can do to reduce the risk.

Research has shown there is a strong link in age, with an increased incidence in women over 40, and the older a woman gets, the greater her risk of getting breast cancer.

The known risk factors include:

- Being over 40
- Having cancer in the other breast
- Family history of the disease, e.g. if you have a mother, sister or aunt who had breast cancer, especially if they were first diagnosed before they were 40-50
- Taking hormone replacement therapy
- Starting your period late
- Stopping your period late
- Not having children or delaying them until your thirties or forties
- The contraceptive pill causes a small increase in risk, but after you stop taking the pill, the risk gradually returns to normal

Screening to Detect Breast Cancer

Screening is a method of routine testing to detect breast cancer as soon as possible and at its earliest stage. This is done by imaging testing, which is designed to detect small changes in the breast over time. Therefore, doctors recommend that testing be performed annually in women over 40.

If you are under 40, you are generally not at the same risk. For these young women, self examinations are recommended as you may still experience symptoms which require investigation, such as lumps and nipple discharge. Also, you may have a family history of cancer which may independently increase your risk.

It is advised that you have a mammogram every year starting at age 40 if you are at average risk. It is also encouraged that you have a clinical breast examination every year starting at age 40.

The most common imaging methods are mammography and breast ultrasound. Depending on the findings of these, you may require a needle test called a biopsy to be certain and this may be the only way to determine whether the problem is cancerous tissue.

Becoming Breast Aware

The earlier a breast cancer is diagnosed, the better the treatment options and prognosis. Therefore, it is important to become breast aware. Here are some helpful tips in becoming breast aware:

- Know what is normal for you
- Know what changes to look and feel for
- Look at and feel your breasts regularly
- Report any changes without delay
- Go for breast screenings if you are aged 40 or over

Preventative Health

Preventative health aims to stop disease before it starts by making your health and well-being a priority. When you practice preventative health, you take action, informed by evidence-based knowledge, to improve your chances of good health and better the odds of stopping the disease before it starts. Research shows that the way we live influences our risk of developing breast cancer.

Live well. Help yourself by:

- Being a healthier body weight and eating a more balanced diet
- Keeping physically active
- Limiting your alcohol consumption and quitting smoking
- Cutting back on fats and sugars
- Eating more fibre, fruits and vegetables

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