Important Facts You Should Know About Breast Cancer

The Basic Facts:
Breast cancer is abnormal cell growth that forms in tissues of the breast, usually the ducts (tubes that carry milk to the nipple) and lobules (glands that make milk). In 2009, 129,370 women were diagnosed with breast cancer and 40,170 women died from the disease that year. Breast cancer is the second most common type of cancer in women following skin cancer. It is also the second leading cause of cancer deaths among women behind lung cancer. There is a less than 1 in 8 chance that a women will develop invasive breast cancer in her life. If invasive breast cancer does develop there is a 1 in 35 chance she will die from the disease. There are 2.5 million breast cancer survivors in the United States.

What Causes Breast Cancer?
The cause of breast cancer is not fully understood. Even though the exact cause of breast cancer is not known, some risk factors have been linked to the disease. Women may have control over some of their risk factors, but others cannot be changed.

Non-Changeable Risk Factors:
• Age – The chances of developing breast cancer increases with age.
• Race – White women are at a slightly higher risk of developing breast cancer. Black women are at a greater risk of more invasive breast cancer and dying from the disease. Asian, Hispanic, and Native American women are at a lower risk of breast cancer.
• Family History – Breast cancer can run in families. Between 5% and 10% of all breast cancer is believed to be inherited.

Risk Factors That You Can Control:
• Alcohol – Use of alcohol has been linked to breast cancer. It is recommended women limit alcohol use to no more than 1 drink per day.
• Weight – Being overweight is a risk factor for breast cancer. It is important to maintain a healthy weight especially after menopause.
• Smoking – Links between smoking and breast cancer are unclear, but it is advisable to avoid the potential risk of smoking and secondhand smoke.

How Does Your Reproductive History Affect Your Risk for Breast Cancer?
The effects of repeated exposure to female reproductive hormones, estrogen and progesterone have been linked to breast cancer. The following situations increase a woman’s risk for breast cancer.

• Never becoming pregnant.
• The older a woman is when she has her first pregnancy.
• Having first menstrual period before age 12.
• Going through menopause after age 55.
• Taking menopausal hormone therapy for many years.
• Recent use of birth control pills.
• Not breast-feeding.
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What is the Family Connection?
Women who have had a close relative (mother, daughter, sister, aunt) with breast cancer are at twice the risk of developing the disease. It does not matter if the family member is on the mother’s or father’s side of the family. Genes that fail to suppress tumor formation can be inherited. Women with a family history of breast cancer should discuss an appropriate screening schedule with their healthcare provider.

Early Detection is Very Important.
Thousands of women’s lives are saved each year by early detection of tumors by screenings. Mammograms are very effective tools for breast cancer detection. Women over 40 should talk with their healthcare provider about getting a mammogram yearly. Women should learn to do self breast exams and do them frequently, and have clinical breast exams performed at least every three years (annually over age 40).

More About Mammograms:
The American Cancer Society recommends a mammogram annually for women over 40. Recently there have been changes in the recommendations for mammograms, so it is important to discuss the benefits of a mammogram with your healthcare provider. A mammogram is an x-ray of the breast. Mammograms are used for screening purposes in women who have no symptoms as well as for women who have symptoms such as a lump. During a mammogram the breast will be pressed flat between two plates in order to spread out the tissue. While the procedure can be painful for some women, the pressure only lasts for a few seconds.

What are the Early Symptoms of Breast Cancer?
Breast cancer may develop without symptoms in the earliest stages. Here are some changes that you might see as the tumor grows:

- A lump or thickening in or near the breast or underarm.
- Dimpling or puckering of the skin on the breast.
- Change in the size or shape of the breast.
- A nipple turned inward into the breast.
- A discharge from the nipple.
- Scaly, red, or swollen skin on the breast.

What Can You Do Now?
The Rural Cancer Prevention Center (RCPC) can help you find a healthcare provider for a mammogram or other breast cancer services. For more information, please contact us at: http://www.mc.uky.edu/ruralhealth/rcpc.asp or call toll-free (866) 686-7272.