

## BREAST CANCER AWARENESS

By Richard B. Carfeld, M.D. of Northwest Breast Associates

**W**hile most breast abnormalities are benign, routine screenings are essential for maintaining breast health. This is because early-stage breast cancer usually produces no symptoms and does not cause pain. Following guidelines for early detection can lead to an early diagnosis if breast cancer is found and result in a more promising outcome.

The National Breast Cancer Foundation estimates that 200,000 women will be diagnosed with breast cancer during 2007. It is the leading cancer among white and African American women and occurs more than any other type of cancer other than skin cancer. Unfortunately, breast cancer is also a leading cause of cancer deaths, second only to lung cancer, and the American Cancer Society estimates that more than 40,000 women will die of breast cancer this year.

Although breast cancer has no known cause, risk factors have been identified. Older age puts women at a higher risk, particularly those over 65. Women who started their period before age 12 or those who went through menopause after age 55 have a higher risk for developing breast cancer. Family history can play a part as women with two or more first-degree relatives (that is, mother or sister) with a breast cancer diagnosis face a higher risk of developing the disease. Women with higher breast density also have a higher risk for breast cancer. Never having given birth or becoming pregnant for the first time at an older age are additional risk factors for breast cancer. Lifestyle choices can also put women at a higher risk. A diet high in saturated fat, obesity and moderate alcohol consumption are known risk factors.

However, it is important to remember that 80 percent of women diagnosed with breast cancer don't fall into these risk-factor categories. While risk factors may be statistically significant they are not firm indications of who will develop the disease.



### HELPFUL WEB SITES

**American Cancer Society**

[www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)

**BreastCancer.org**

[www.breastcancer.org](http://www.breastcancer.org)

**Susan G. Komen for the Cure**

[www.komen.org](http://www.komen.org)

**Overlake Hospital Medical Center**

[www.overlakehospital.org](http://www.overlakehospital.org)

As with all cancers, finding the cancer before it spreads to other parts of the body is key to a successful recovery. This is why every woman should follow an early detection plan for breast cancer regardless of age, family history or any other risk factor.

Women should rely on their own familiarity with their breasts, and professional screenings, for help in detecting possible signs of breast cancer. Clinical breast exams should start at age 20 and occur once every year until the age of 39. Women should also begin monthly self-examinations at age 20, looking for changes in the look or feel of the breast or nipple. At age 40 women should begin receiving mammograms every one to two years and women older than 50 should get screened once every year. These steps will help prevent breast cancer from going undetected. Keep in mind that a lowfat diet, regular exercise and avoidance of smoking and drinking will improve a woman's

overall health and possibly lower the risk for developing the disease.

The latest technology in breast cancer detection and treatment continues to increase the survival rate of women with breast cancer. Digital mammography is a new method of screening that provides more accurate imaging, especially for women under age 55 and those with dense breast tissue. Unlike film screening, digital mammography can penetrate further into the breast tissue producing a more reliable image. The digital imaging is created faster than film screens and can be viewed online and stored on CD-ROM. This allows professionals to evaluate screening results more easily. Also, additional diagnostic procedures, such as ultrasound imaging, advanced breast biopsy techniques and breast MRIs are available and can be used to detect and diagnose breast cancer.

If a woman does encounter a breast cancer diagnosis, she has more treatment options than ever before. Radiation can be done externally or internally with a treatment called Mammosite, an innovative therapy suitable for many women. It can reduce treatment time to five days.

While women have a one in eight chance of developing breast cancer during their lifetime, the cure rate is constantly improving. Right now there are 2 million women living who have been treated for breast cancer and the cure rate for a breast cancer diagnosis is 75 percent.

Ongoing research aims to better predict who will be affected by breast cancer. Progress in understanding how exercise, weight and diet can affect the risk of breast cancer is expected now that the human genome has been sequenced. Studies are also being conducted to find better treatment plans and prevention methods.

Until we better understand why and how breast cancer develops, the best prevention for all women is to stay on top of their own breast health and maintain an early detection plan throughout their lifetime.