

## Think Pink: October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month



Women in the United States get breast cancer more than any other type of cancer except for skin cancer. It is second only to lung cancer as a cause of cancer death in women, and it is the leading cause of cancer deaths for women between the ages of 40 and 59. According to the National Cancer Institute, approximately 182,460 women will be diagnosed with breast cancer and 40,480 women will die from the cancer this year.

The majority of all breast cancers occur in women with no known risk factors. That means all women are at risk, and that risk increases with age. Statistically, Hispanic women show lower breast cancer screening rates than non-Hispanic white women and tend to seek and attain healthcare services less frequently than other ethnic groups. However, breast cancer is the most commonly diagnosed cancer among Hispanic women and 20% are more likely to die from the disease. This contradiction is due to the fact that Hispanic women are less likely to get yearly mammograms and more likely to be diagnosed at later stages. Studies consistently show that low income, low educational attainment, lack of health insurance, the inability to speak English, lack of awareness of risks and screening methods and lack of physician referral play important roles in the lower rates of screening utilization by Hispanic women.

For Black women, breast cancer is the most common and the second leading cause of cancer death, exceeded only by lung cancer. Although breast cancer incidence is lower among Black women, there is a 36% higher breast cancer death rate than Caucasian women. In recent decades, the survival rate among Black women has increased.

Despite these startling numbers, breast cancer death rates are on the decline. Doctors and research have made great strides in early diagnosis and treatment. Thirty-five years ago, approximately 75% of women diagnosed with the cancer survived five years; today 90% will survive their disease for five years. Thirty-five years ago mastectomy was the only accepted surgical option for breast cancer treatment. Today, breast-conserving surgery (lumpectomy), followed by local radiation is the preferred treatment. Thirty-five years ago, clinical investigation of combination chemotherapy, using multiple drugs with different mechanisms of action, and of hormonal therapy as post-surgical treatment for breast cancer was in its earliest stages. Today, combination chemotherapy has become standard in the treatment of women with early stage breast cancer.

As we move forward in the fight against breast cancer, the medical world's increasing knowledge of genetics, molecular biology and immunology will help develop more effective and less toxic treatments for breast cancer. In addition, the knowledge will be used to some day personalize breast cancer therapy.

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