

Breast Cancer

This is the most common form of cancer among women worldwide. It is the third most common cause of cancer related mortality in India. One third of women with breast cancer die from the disease. Worldwide it is the fifth most common cause of cancer death (after lung, stomach, liver and colon cancer).

What is cancer?

Cancer is a group of 100 different diseases. Cells of an organ begin to divide rapidly without control of the body's regulatory mechanisms. These cells can then spread to distant organs. This is known as metastasis. The most common sites of metastasis include bone, liver, lung and brain. Unexplained weight loss can occasionally herald breast cancer.

There are several **RISK FACTORS** for breast cancer. These include:

- Female gender
- Aging
- Mother/sister suffering from the disease
- Early onset of periods and late menopause
- Childbirth after the age of thirty
- Use of hormone replacement therapy
- Radiation exposure
- Obesity

Genetics: People carrying certain particular sets of genes are more susceptible to breast cancer. In particular people with BRCA-1 and BRCA-2 genes have a 30 to 40% increased susceptibility to breast as well as ovarian cancer.

In order to facilitate early detection of breast cancer there are certain abnormal signs and symptoms which one should look out for. These include:

- Puckering of skin
- Dimpling of skin
- Retraction of skin
- Nipple discharge
- Retracted nipple
- Change in size of breast
- Scaling around nipples
- Sore on the breast that does not heal.

Screening for breast cancer

Screening for breast cancer is an attempt to find unsuspected cancers. The most common methods of detection are self and clinical breast examination, X-ray mammography, ultrasound and occasionally MRI.

Mammography is still the modality of choice for screening of early breast cancer. It is relatively fast, reasonably accurate and widely available. Mammography has been estimated to reduce breast cancer related mortality by 20 to 30%.

The American Cancer society recommends that women 40 years of age or older should have a mammogram every one to two years. Women with one or more first degree relative (mother, sister or daughter) with pre menopausal breast cancer should begin screening at an early age.

It is usually suggested to start screening at an age 10 years less than the age the relative was diagnosed with breast cancer.

Breast cancer is usually diagnosed by the examination of surgically removed breast tissue. However a small number of procedures such as fine needle aspiration cytology can help in making a diagnosis prior to surgery. Imaging tests are sometimes required to detect metastasis (spread) and include Chest X-ray, bone scan, CT, MRI and PET scan.

** In the month of October, breast cancer is recognized by survivors, family and friends of survivors and /or victims of the disease. A pink ribbon is worn to recognize the struggle that sufferers face when battling cancer.

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