BREAST CANCER: A COMPLEX KILLER

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For Pamplin Media Group

Deaths from breast cancer have gone down, but the risk of being diagnosed with breast cancer is higher than ever.

Why? Because the tools and therapies for detection and treatment of breast cancer are improving, but risk factors are increasing.

"The biggest risks for breast cancer are being a woman and aging," said Anupama Acheson, MD, Oncologist at Providence Cancer Center. Other risk factors include obesity, physical activity, alcohol consumption, and the use of hormonal replacement therapy.

Other factors that may be of concern are family history, previous breast biopsies, known gene mutation, and the age a woman starts menstruating.

BreastCancer.org and National Breast Cancer Foundation report that an estimated 246,600 women will be diagnosed with invasive breast cancer this year. BreastCancer.org reported that in 2015, the death rate was expected at 40,450. National Breast Cancer Foundation predicts that in 2016 the death rate will be more than 40,000.

Kimberly Windstar, MEd, ND, professor and attending physician at National University of Natural Medicine attributes the decrease in mortality rate to detection through screening.

"If you catch it earlier the likelihood of dying of a disease is significantly less," said Windstar. "When breast cancer is detected — when it’s less than a centimeter — there’s a 90 to 98 percent five-year survival rate. Once you can feel a lump there’s a greater risk it’s already gone to the lymph nodes."

A person can have low risk factors and still get breast cancer, but there are some preventative measures. Windstar explained, "There’s increasing evidence that larger amounts of fruits and vegetables in the diet have decreased the risks for breast cancer. Also, I recommend that women exercise. 150 minutes a week is what’s recommended, and that could just be walking. If someone is doing more vigorous exercise they could do less. There is great evidence in the research for decreasing breast cancer risk in women who exercise compared to women who don’t."

More recommendations are to get really good sleep, "because lower melatonin rates in the body have been associated with increased risk for breast cancer. There’s been a lot of research that shift workers have increased risk of breast cancer," said Windstar. And, "I always recommend stress reduction. I have definitely seen research that stress increases the risks of cancer. It’s because your immune system can’t function as well."

More positive news for the decrease in deaths due to breast cancer is significant innovations. "We have so many more therapies that are more effective. We have a lot of what we call targeted therapies that attack specific growth or division pathways of breast cancer cells," Acheson said. "We’re also moving into the arena of immunotherapy that is part of some really exciting new research at the Providence Cancer Center." Development of some of the most advanced drugs and targeted therapies have been based on the hard work of women who have had metastatic breast cancer, and who were willing to participate in clinical trials. Acheson continued, "When we find that we’ve hit on something that is really working well with them then we can move it forward and test it on women who have earlier stage breast cancer in the hopes that they never develop metastatic breast cancer."