

Preventive Breast Health Care

By Deborah Savran

There is a call for a shift in the approach to breast health care. Not away from needed improvements in accuracy and safety of breast screenings, nor away from advancements in the treatment of existing disease, but rather equally towards wellness care for breast health. This shift is to make the change from a fear-based, "looking for pathology" attitude towards our breasts, to one based upon prevention through nourishment, body awareness, and healthy lifestyle choices.

The focus on cancer detection, currently mainly through mammography, can help detect existing breast cancer, but it does nothing at all in the way of cancer prevention. Let's get familiar with what is known to support the health of our breasts.

Lifestyle and Prevention

Maintain a Healthy Weight

The American Institute of Cancer Research recently released a review of all the studies that looked at preventing breast cancer. They concluded that 40 percent of cases could have been prevented with lifestyle changes. Out of all of the lifestyle measures examined, the most significant was, particularly after menopause, to maintain a healthy weight. Being overweight generally leads to increased estrogen and also affects growth factors and insulin. This creates conditions in the body that are more stimulating for cancer cells to grow in, and less able to eradicate abnormal cells. Even more essential than healthy weight may be a low body-fat percentage.

Get Regular Exercise

Vital to the goal of maintaining a healthy weight and low body fat percentage is exercise. Women who exercise four or more hours a week have a significant reduction in their risk of breast cancer. Encourage yourself, and your daughters if you have them, to get in the habit of regular exercise. It is never too late to begin.

Breastfeed

Breastfeeding decreases cancer risk, particularly in women who have a family history of this disease. The longer you breastfeed, the greater the protective effects.

Limit Alcohol Consumption

Women who drink no more than one alcoholic beverage a day, or who abstain completely, reduce their risk of breast cancer. If you do have a drink, take a folic acid supplement, as alcohol consumption causes folate levels to drop. The combination of alcohol consumption and low folate levels is associated with a higher risk of breast cancer.

Eat a Good Diet

A general healthful, organic, whole-food and plant-based diet supports the health of our breasts, our whole being, and the planet. Some of the foods that are best for preventing breast cancer contain phytochemicals. In particular:

Eat green leafy vegetables, parsley and celery. These foods are good sources for flavones, a group of flavanoids that have been shown to reduce the risk of breast cancer.

Eat vegetables from the cruciferous family, such as broccoli, brussel sprouts, cabbage, kale and cauliflower. Indole-3-carbinol and sulforaphane are both found in this family of vegetables, and there is mounting evidence that both these phytochemicals reduce the risk of breast cancer. Cruciferous family vegetables also contain D-glucaric acid, which helps the body bind and excrete toxins and harmful estrogens. D-glucaric acid is also found in fruits such as oranges, apples and grapefruits.

Medicinal Mushrooms, such as maitake and shitake should always be cooked to derive their benefits.

Green Tea contains a powerful blend of anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties. Studies show that women who regularly drink green tea have a lower risk of cancer, and a better prognosis for survival if they do have breast cancer. Choose high quality, organic green tea.

Flax Seeds support a healthy fatty acid profile, and can extend the length of a woman's menstrual cycle. Longer, and therefore fewer, menstrual cycles in a woman's lifetime reduces her risk of breast cancer. Flaxseeds should be very freshly ground as their natural oils quickly deteriorate upon heating or grinding. Three or more tablespoons a day may be added to smoothies, salads, oatmeal, cereal or soups.

Soy foods are controversial as to their health benefits and health detriments. Studies do suggest that women who eat moderate amounts of soy throughout their lives have lower risk of breast cancer. It is thought this protective effect may originate from prepubescent girls who consume soy early in life. In keeping with a traditional foods and whole foods approach to eating, eat soy products that are traditional and fermented, such as miso, edamame, tofu, tamari and tempeh. Avoid soy in the form of soy protein isolates, soy protein concentrates, hydrolyzed soy protein, and soy oil. Limit eating nontraditional, processed soy foods such as soy cheese, soy milk, and soy meat alternatives.

Alternative Natural Sweeteners such as stevia, agave and xylitol can help satisfy a sweet tooth without the risks associated with refined sugars. High consumption of sugary foods is associated with an increased breast cancer risk. When we eat sugar, our pancreas responds by releasing a large amount of insulin. High insulin levels may significantly increase the risk of breast cancer.

Vitamin D

Optimal levels of vitamin D support the healthy formation and function of cells in the entire body. There is mounting research that breast health is promoted with optimal levels of vitamin D. Find out what your vitamin D levels are. If levels are below normal, or even in the low end of normal (below 52 ng/ml), then supplementation with Vitamin D3, initially at 5,000 IU's per day, is advisable. Once optimal levels are reached, reduce to 2,000 IU's per day. And, of course, the best source of vitamin D is brief sun exposure without sunscreen.

Breast Awareness and Self-Care

Monthly breast self-examination is an approach focused on looking for any potentially dangerous lumps and can thus be frightening for many women. It is no longer recommended by the American Cancer Society. The new approach is one of breast awareness and physically caring for the breasts. This can include a combination of self-massage, lymphatic drainage and self-examination if desired. Learning to become familiar with our breasts and the way they naturally change with our cycle and time, and learning to touch ourselves here without fear, is a healing approach. It will also help a woman recognize if a change has occurred that requires further diagnostics, but self-care, rather than diagnostics, is the main focus.

Another Option—Thermography

Thermography, or Thermal Digital Imaging, is part of a multifaceted approach to breast screening. Thermography embraces the naturopathic principle to “first do no harm” as it is radiation- and compression-free. It is also arguably preventive, as it can detect breast cancers at much earlier stages than mammography. Many breast cancers in this very early stage are reversible with nutritional, holistic treatments and lifestyle changes alone.

Thermography, as an adjunct to clinical examination and mammography, increases the chance of detecting early-stage cancers to 95 percent. It also provides an alternative diagnostic option for women who are not comfortable receiving annual radiation exposure, albeit at low levels, which occur during a mammogram. Furthermore, imaging of the denser breast tissue of premenopausal women is equally precise with thermography, while mammography has poorer accuracy with premenopausal women.

The time for greater acceptance, use and funding of research for this FDA-approved diagnostic tool is now. Women deserve a radiation-free, highly sensitive and noninvasive screening for breast cancer. Whatever treatment option a woman chooses, the earlier breast cancer is detected, the better the prognosis.

Pay attention to your breasts. May your focus be on the fact that there are many simple things we can do to enhance breast health and prevent breast cancer. This can empower us to nurture our breasts and ourselves in an informed, progressive, healing and non-fear-based manner.

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