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Can breast cancer be prevented?

Q *I am a woman in my 40s. What is the most common cancer that I should look out for?*

A Based on the Singapore Cancer Registry Annual Registry Report (2015), the top cancer in Singapore for women from 2011 to 2015 is breast cancer (29.1 per cent).

What are the symptoms of breast cancer?

Many patients with early breast cancer do not have any symptoms, hence the importance of breast screening using mammograms from the age of 40 years. The survival rate is excellent after treatment.

When there are symptoms, the most common is a lump in the breast. Some patients feel a lump under the armpit, one-sided nipple discharge or observe skin changes such as rash around the nipple. Loss of weight, bone pain, blurred vision and headaches can happen if the cancer has spread. When symptoms occur, do ask to see a specialist directly.

Who are at risk?

Being female is the greatest risk factor for developing breast cancer. For every 100 women who get breast cancer, there will be one man diagnosed with it.

High body mass index, alcohol intake and a sedentary lifestyle also increase the risk of breast cancer. Exogenous sources of female hormones such as hormone replacement therapy also increase the risk of breast cancer.

Women found to have a genetic mutation such as BRCA may have a 60 to 80 per cent lifetime risk up to the age of 75 years. Having a strong family history of breast or ovarian cancer also increases risks.



Regular screening using mammograms is recommended to protect you and your loved ones from breast cancer, the most common cancer affecting women in Singapore. PHOTO: ISTOCK

How can I prevent breast cancer?

Mammography is recommended annually from age 40 years, and twice yearly from age 50 years.

For very high-risk individuals such as BRCA gene carriers, annual magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) and mammogram are recommended. There is also the option of a double mastectomy or taking medication. The risk of breast cancer falls drastically but is not zero.

What can I do between screenings?

For patients with normal risk, a monthly breast self-examination seven to 10 days after the start of menstruation is recommended. Any lump that persists beyond the next menstruation should be investigated. Women who have reached menopause should continue to do monthly self-examination on a fixed day every month.

What are some treatment options?

In very early cancers, a lumpec-

tomy with radiotherapy or mastectomy can be performed depending on the extent of disease and patient choice.

In invasive breast cancers, surgery may be followed by chemotherapy, radiotherapy and hormonal therapy as required. In certain locally advanced cancers, chemotherapy may sometimes be given upfront to shrink the cancers to allow breast conservation.

Can the cancer recur?

Yes. The highest risk of recurrence is usually in the initial few years after diagnosis, hence the need for follow up. Surveillance includes clinical and imaging check up on a regular basis. Compliance with follow-ups is extremely important as a result.

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