

The truth about breast cancer

With the incidence of this disease on the rise, it has become even more important to know the risks and treatment involved



How is breast cancer managed and treated here in Singapore? We find out more from Dr Tan Sing Huang, a medical oncologist at Mount Alvernia Hospital's OncoCare Cancer Centre.

How prevalent is breast cancer in Singapore?

Breast cancer is the top women's cancer worldwide, and remains the number one women's cancer here for the past 50 years. Its incidence rate has more than tripled from 20 to almost 70 per 100,000 women over five decades.

This increased rate could be attributed to a shift in our reproductive patterns and lifestyle such as delayed childbearing, having fewer or no children, obesity and reduced breastfeeding. Breast cancer incidence starts to increase from the age of 30 and peaks at 60 to 75 years, before declining after 80 years.

Is this disease preventable?

We cannot change risk factors such as ageing, starting periods early (younger than 12 years old), or having a family history of breast cancer. However, we can alter our lifestyles by limiting alcohol intake and smoking, having children at a younger age, breastfeeding, exercising regularly and consuming a healthy diet rich in vegetables, fruits, fish, and less saturated fats.

Early detection with screening saves lives too. Treatment may also be simpler; mastectomy or chemotherapy may even be avoided. Women at average risk (aged 50 and above) should undergo screening mammograms biennially. Those aged 40 to 49 are also encouraged to go for annual mammograms but can discuss the

benefits or limitations with their doctor.

Breast self-examination trains familiarity with what feels normal so changes can be noticed early. This is especially pertinent for younger women (below 40 years old) when mammograms are not recommended routinely.

How do you decide on the best form of treatment, and is surgery always an option?

The treatment aim and outcome depends on factors like stage and subtype. For cancers confined to the breast and regional lymph nodes (stages I-III), we treat with curative intent but for stage IV (advanced) disease, treatment is aimed at controlling the disease and prolonging survival.

Surgery is an indispensable part of the treatment for stages I-III cancers. Chemotherapy, radiotherapy, and anti-hormonal therapy may be needed as well. Sometimes, chemotherapy is given to shrink the tumour before surgery to facilitate the chances of preserving the breast. Stage IV cancers may require a variety of treatments such as chemotherapy, anti-hormonal therapy, immunotherapy, or targeted therapy.

On the road to recovery, it is important to obtain emotional and psychological support. Joining a support group or even volunteering could help alleviate fears and prove fulfilling. Finally, remember to focus on the positives and do not let cancer define you.

Above:
Breast cancer remains the top women's cancer in Singapore, with incidence rates tripling over the past 50 years.

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