

The truth about breast cancer

As we mark Breast Cancer Awareness month, Dr Lee Guek Eng of ICON Cancer Centre keeps us abreast of things

How has breast cancer evolved in Singapore over the years?

Breast cancer, the most common cancer among women, has tripled since the 70's. However, the mortality rate has not risen as much due in part to early detection for more effective treatment. Hence, patient outcomes tend to be better for breast cancer patients than other cancer patients. Compared to other cancers, genetic testing for breast cancer can determine the presence of specific mutated genes that heighten the risk for developing the disease.

The incidence of breast cancer in young women is high in Asia; those aged 44 and below make up for 18 per cent of our breast cancer population. It is important to encourage young women to do self-breast examinations, go for screenings and report changes in breasts to their doctor. Changes that warrant further investigation include lumps in the breasts, changes in the skin texture and shape of the nipples and breasts, and nipple discharge. However, not all may indicate the presence of breast cancer.

What are some treatment options available today?

Treatment is highly individualised, depending on their breast cancer subtypes. Before developing a treatment plan, we look at the stage and profile of the cancer. Most plans adopt a multi-disciplinary approach; for early stage breast cancer, surgery is done to remove the breast cancer, followed by adjuvant therapies such as chemotherapy, radiotherapy, hormonal therapy, and/or targeted therapy to reduce cancer recurrence. In the case of stage IV cancer, the usual process would be a systemic treatment with the aim of prolonging life and ensuring quality of life.

What are some ways to minimise the risk of developing breast cancer?

- Know your family's medical history
- Exercise at least 30 minutes, five times a week
- Eat a healthy diet
- Avoid processed foods and fatty meats
- Cut down or stop drinking alcohol
- Stop smoking

What side-effects do patients experience?

Nausea and vomiting are common, but have improved dramatically over the years with modern anti-nausea medicine. Hair loss is also quite common, but temporary. Bone density loss is another side-effect for post-menopausal women undergoing hormone treatment. Supplements and injections for preventing bone loss during hormone treatment in post-menopausal women are quite effective, but should always be combined with diet and exercise.

Side effects differ from person to person; the list is not exhaustive. Most common side effects include those mentioned as well as fatigue, and lowered immunity.

How are survival rates determined?

By the stage and biology of the cancer. For Stage I cancer patients, the five-year survival rate is more than 90 per cent; for Stage II, it is around 80 per cent. The survival rate decreases as the stage of the cancer increases. When the original breast cancer recurs in other organs such as the lymph nodes, lung, liver or brain, it is considered a Stage IV cancer. Stage IV cancers are not curable, but very treatable with various modern medicines and therapies.



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