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Breast Cancer

Reducing Your Risk

by Noelle Robbins

There is good news about breast cancer. The National Cancer Institute reports that, after decades of steadily climbing rates, the incidence of new breast cancer cases in American women seems to be slowing. And the odds of surviving a breast cancer diagnosis are rising.

Alamedan Valerie O'Dell knows the importance of staying focused on these hopeful statistics. "I had a good friend with breast cancer, so I started paying more attention to my self exams," says O'Dell. Although she had a mammogram less than one year before, a spark of pain in her right breast concerned her. "I felt a thickening, not a lump. I had always thought that breast cancer doesn't hurt."



Her nurse practitioner agreed that, because of her recent mammogram, the chances O'Dell had a serious problem were small. But a heightened sense of awareness coupled with gut instinct propelled O'Dell forward. And despite receiving news that created "absolutely, hands down, the worst moment of my life," she is grateful that she pushed ahead with testing that confirmed her worst fear. O'Dell had breast cancer.

Nationwide almost 213,000 women were diagnosed with breast cancer in 2006. The likelihood of developing breast cancer increases with age, and 77 percent of cases are in women over 50. But younger women like O'Dell, who was diagnosed in her mid-40s, face special challenges, because cancer in premenopausal women may be harder to detect because of breast density, and such cancer may be more aggressive .

Meridithe Mendelsohn, administrative director of the Carol Ann Read Breast Health Center at Alta Bates Summit Medical Center in Oakland, says younger women need more information about preventing and detecting breast cancer. "There are 120 different types of breast cancer," says Mendelsohn, so pinning down specific risk factors is difficult. But lifetime exposure to estrogen raises risk, and lifestyle choices that affect estrogen levels are important. "Exercise and diet—all good. Exercise lowers estrogen," she says. Maintaining a healthy weight also lowers estrogen exposure. Alcohol consumption can raise hormonal levels. "More than two drinks per day can increase risk," she says. And there is increasing focus on environmental toxins, including components of cosmetics, which mimic estrogen in the body.

Wendy Favila-Penney, director of the Cancer Navigator Program at Alameda County Medical Center,

wants women to know that diagnosing cancer at Stage 1 or 2 can result in a 97 percent cure rate. She encourages young women to request yearly clinical breast exams starting at 18. More important is becoming comfortable and experienced with self-breast exams. "Eight-five percent of lumps felt through self-exam are not cancerous, but early detection is key." She recommends a baseline mammogram for all women at age 40 or an MRI or ultrasound, depending on breast density. For women with a family history of premenopausal breast cancer in a mother or sister, age 30 is not too early for a first mammogram.

Both Mendelsohn and Favila-Penney adamantly urge women to advocate for their own health.

O'Dell wholeheartedly concurs. "Don't ever abdicate responsibility. Do self-exams. Don't be afraid of what you're going to find." Following her breast cancer treatment O'Dell is full of hope for the future. She knows, with early detection, "People do survive." □