

Parish Health News



October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month. Most of us women know we should get breast exams every 3 years until age 40, then every year after that. Also at age 40 is when we should begin our routine mammograms. I've known a lot of patients who found their own breast cancers by doing their monthly self breast exams. Any woman, no matter her age, who finds a change such as a lump, puckering, discharge or distressed skin over the breast should contact her primary healthcare provider for an expert exam. And guess what, although it is more rare, men can also develop breast cancer.

Did you know that all breast cancers are not the same? Sure, some are caught early (stage 0) and some are caught later (stage IV) but that isn't the only difference. Breast cancer cells will be examined to learn more about the particular type of breast cancer an individual has. Treatments vary, depending on the findings.

Many breast cancers are referred to as HR+. This means they have hormone receptors that make them grow more aggressively when they are exposed to estrogen or progesterone or both. Part of the treatment for these types of cancers is to suppress hormone production.

Some cancer cells have too many receptors for the human epidermal growth factor. These growth factors are something we all have but when a cell has too many receptors for it, they bring in more growth factor and those cells grow quite rapidly. These types of cancers are called HER2+ and they can be very aggressive. Fortunately, there are now targeted therapies that can be quite effective in stopping this process.

Another type of breast cancer is referred to as "triple negative" because it's growth is not accelerated by estrogen or progesterone and they have only the normal amount of receptors for the human epidermal growth factors. That sounds like a good thing, but it also means the new, targeted therapies are not effective. Traditional chemotherapy may be the best choice.



There are new drugs coming out all the time, drugs that fight breast cancers from many different angles. Early detection is vitally important. Even better is finding ways to prevent breast cancer in the first place. General recommendations at this time include a healthy diet and maintaining a healthy weight. Additionally we are advised to limit alcohol, avoid or quit smoking and stay active. Avoiding environmental pollutants and limiting exposure to radiation is important. Breastfeeding is known to reduce the risk of breast cancer. Avoiding or limiting dose and duration of hormone replacement therapy is also advised.

As with all threats to our health, I think it is important to learn what we can to protect ourselves. Our bodies are a gift from God and it is our obligation to try to take good care of that gift. Luckily, we know who's we are and we do not need to live in fear.

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