



Cancer caution

Understanding and reducing your risk of breast cancer

by DEBORAH HERLAX ENOS



ERICA JONES PHOTOGRAPHY

Deborah Herlax Enos created the website *WhyDidIGetCancer.com*, where she interviews experts about cancer prevention for her podcast.

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The doctor told me, “You have breast cancer.” I was shocked. I’m a nutritionist. I run half-marathons and do yoga. I did everything I could to prevent breast cancer; how could this happen to me? The weight of it all and the total lack of control turned my world upside down. After two lumpectomies, my doctors still couldn’t get clean margins, so we decided to move forward with a mastectomy on November 20, 2020, followed by reconstruction on March 12, 2021. I will continue with the hospital surveillance protocol for the next five years.

Yes, mammograms

I am now cancer-free. What I have learned along the way is that early detection is critical and attitude is everything. I might have had a different outcome if I’d skipped my mammogram. My oncologist, Dr. April Phantana-angkool, explains she doesn’t enjoy getting mammograms either, but they can detect breast cancer early, before you can feel a lump. She reminds me that the annoyance of a mammogram only lasts a few seconds, and the benefits far outweigh the discomfort.



FROM LEFT: © SUTHISAK RAWPIXEL.COM; PIXEL-SHOT / STOCK.ADOBE.COM

Risk assessment

Generally, breast cancer, which Phantana-angkool refers to as the “silent cancer,” shows no symptoms in the early stages. She also says that breast cancer signs and symptoms are different for everyone, which makes pinpointing cancer in its early stages particularly challenging. You are at average risk for breast cancer if you have no history or symptoms of breast cancer; no history of benign breast disease or of breast cancer in a parent, sibling or child; or a history of mantle radiation. You are at a higher risk if you *do* have any of those factors and/or a hereditary syndrome such as a BRCA (breast cancer gene) mutation. Additional factors that increase risk include early menarche, late menopause, a history of using hormone replacement therapy, smoking, alcohol use and dense breast tissue.

Warning signs

Risk factors aside, these are symptoms you should never ignore:

- Pain in any area of the breast
- Nipple discharge
- Skin changes on your breast
- Breast thickening or swelling
- A new lump in the breast or underarm

Risk reduction

To reduce your risk, doctors recommend a few simple steps:

- Engage in at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity per day.
- Aim for a body mass index of 25

or less after menopause.

- Drink no more than seven alcoholic beverages per week.

If you are at average risk of breast cancer, a few recommended steps you can take to catch any issues early include a clinical breast examination every one to three years if you are 25 to 40 years old and a mammogram or ultrasound plus a clinical breast examination every one to two years if you are over 40. I had very few risk factors for breast cancer. I may never know why I got it. But I’m grateful I made a point of getting my mammogram; you may be grateful for getting one too. ■

Others at risk

Breast cancer in women under 40 is rare. Still, more than 12,000 young women develop breast cancer each year, and the cancer tends to be more aggressive. Men make up about 1% of breast cancer cases and their cases are more commonly associated with the BRCA2 mutation. Unfortunately, data on breast cancer in men is limited, so treatment recommendations have been adapted from research on women. Self-exams can alert men and women to changes in breast tissue.—DHE



MEET YOUR MENTOR

The emotional toll of being diagnosed and treated for cancer was much more than I expected. I’m a planner, but with cancer everything changed. I had to learn to get comfortable with being uncertain about my future. My doctor suggested a mentor. So, I signed up for an online support group and a mentor (through Imerman Angels; imermanangels.org) and filled out a questionnaire, and they connected me to a breast cancer survivor who had the same type I had. Talking to her gave me a vision of a life beyond cancer. There are many free support services for cancer patients and their caregivers. They usually offer free online meditation, support groups, cooking classes and more.—DHE