

Article date: 2016

written by Michelle J. Pouliot N.D.

Perspectives on 25 Years of Breast Cancer Awareness

In the past 25 years, practicing as a naturopathic physician specializing in women's health and as myself, a 57 year old woman, I am acutely aware of how breast cancer affects our lives. We are inundated with breast cancer statistics, wrapped up in pink ribbons, saddened by widely publicized stories of celebrities breast cancer journeys, confused by changing recommendations for mammograms and self-breast exams, and unsure of breast cancer causes, prevention and cures.

My patients have many questions about breast cancer. If there is no family history of breast cancer are they still at risk? Do mammograms cause breast cancer? Do hormone support therapies cause breast cancer? What lifestyle choices can help prevent breast cancer?

Breast cancer is the second most common cancer diagnosis in the United States. The incidence of breast cancer increases with a woman's age. Postmenopausal women account for 74% of diagnosed breast cancer. The statistic we all hear, one out of every eight adult women will be diagnosed with breast cancer, becomes true by the time we are in our eighties. Family history of breast cancer is found in only 5 to 10 percent of women. Women with a parent, sibling or child having breast cancer, are at twice the risk for developing the disease. Women with strong family history, who are positive for the genes BRCA1, BRCA2 and p53, have a 40 to 85 percent lifetime risk of developing breast cancer.

These statistics can be intimidating. One of the reasons why breast cancer is the second most frequently diagnosed cancers in the United States, is not only because of frequency of occurrence, but is also, because mammograms are very effective at finding breast cancer. Mammograms detect about 90% of breast cancers and become more accurate as we age when our breast tissue becomes less dense. In Connecticut, by law, women are entitled to have breast ultrasounds, if the mammogram determines they have dense breast tissue. Mammograms have not been found to increase the risk of breast cancer, though this remains a controversial issue for in the minds of many women. Over all, mammograms are associated with a decreased risk of death from breast cancer.

Michelle J. Pouliot N.D.
New Hartford Naturopathic Health Center, LLC
Phone: 860.238.7983

When should we start having mammograms? The American Cancer society recommends annual mammograms starting at the age of 40. Other recommendations advises starting at 50 years old. I suggest patients make an informed decision about mammograms based on their individual concerns. Is there any family history? Do they have dense breast tissue? Are they confident with their own self breast exams and the clinical breast exams by their physicians? It's not unusual for my patients to tell me they're afraid to check their own breasts because they are lumpy and bumpy. Breast tissue texture is not smooth and uniform because breasts are composed ductal and lobular tissue, connective and lymphatic tissue, fat, and beneath that all, muscle. I encourage patients to get to know their breast lumps and bumps, which we check together at their annual exams. Also keep in mind, for women still having their menstrual cycle, breast tissue changes during the cycle. Contrary to some research that says breast palpation exams are not effective for detection of breast changes, I've seen many women who were the first to notice something different about their breast, which thankfully, most of the time after further work up, is benign. For women who can't do self-breast exams, women with a family breast cancer history, and women on hormone replacement or hormonal birth control, I do recommend annual mammograms.

Some patients also ask if breast thermography can be done in place of mammograms and breasts ultrasound. Breast thermography was approved by the FDA in 1982 as a tool for detection of breast tissue irregularities. It is a technology of displaying temperature and vascular variation in breasts which can be useful for observing potential problematic changes to breast tissue. The interpretation of the thermograms relies on the expertise of the practitioner reading the results. For women interested in breast thermography, I suggest they discuss it with their physician who does their annual gynecological exams, and how to best incorporate it into their breast care plan, which should include mammography for most women over 40.

Many of my patients have perimenopausal or menopausal concerns. Some women want to consider hormone replacement as part of their treatment plan. The question often arises if hormone replacement therapy with increase their risk for getting breast cancer.

Michelle J. Pouliot N.D.
New Hartford Naturopathic Health Center, LLC
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In 2002, the Women's Health Institute published findings that menopausal women on PremPro, had more diagnosed breast cancer incidence than women not on PremPro, or women on Premarin alone. Premarin is combination of several estrogens from pregnant horse urine and Provera is a synthetic progesterone (progestin). Further follow up on this study continued to show that women on just Premarin were not at increased breast cancer risk, but those women taking Provera as part of their hormone therapy were at risk for more breast cancer. Studies also show women who have taken birth control pills, which contain synthetic estrogens and progestins, for 10 years have at slightly higher breast cancer risk. My advice to women is to avoid any synthetic progesterone (provera) and progestins that are found in hormone replacements or birth control after the age of 35.

I'm often asked if bio-identical or natural hormones are safer than synthetic hormones. This is a long and complicated highly debated topic. It is apparent synthetic progesterone is problematic. It's not entirely clear that natural hormones are safer. Even estrogen therapy does slightly increase the risk of breast cancer. Estrogen and progesterone probably don't cause breast cancer, but most breast cancers have estrogen and progesterone receptors that when stimulated by these hormones, may increase the rate of breast cancer growth. So the short answer to the hormone safety question is that any hormone therapies slightly increase breast cancer risk. Some of my patients still choose hormone replacement therapies because of the severity of their menopausal symptoms and sexual health concerns. For some women improving the quality of their life with a well thought out personalized hormonal support, is the right health choice for them.

What lifestyle choices can we make to improve our breast health and possibly help prevent breast cancer? As always, fresh, clean, nutritious food is the first and best medicine for ensuring vital health. Vitamins, minerals and herbs may have a role in maintaining or balancing health but they're a drop in the bucket compared to a healthy diet. Many studies have shown high intake of colorful fruits and vegetables decrease the risk of breast cancer recurrence in women who've had breast cancer, so they may play a role in prevention too. Five servings of vegetables and fruits appear to be the daily minimum. Be sure to include the cruciferous vegetable such as broccoli, cauliflower, brussel sprouts, and cabbage.

Regular exercise and a good nutrition appear to be a powerful combination against breast cancer. A report from on 2007 oncology journal following women who had breast cancer, showed the risk of dying from breast cancer was reduced by half in the women who exercised 30 minutes 6 days per week, and who ate 5 servings of vegetable and fruit daily. There isn't a drug available that can make that same claim.

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Patients also ask how alcohol, sugar, or being overweight affects their chances of developing breast cancer. There is a definite relationship between the amount of alcohol women consume and increased risk. The more alcohol women drink, the greater the risk. Some literature states 3 to 5 servings per week may be safe while other studies haven't determined any amount is safe. Over consumption of sugar also contributes to breast cancer risk not only because it can contribute to unhealthy body weight, but it can also lead to insulin resistance. Insulin resistance occurs when the body is overwhelmed with excessive sugar and simple carbohydrate consumption. A high body mass index (BMI) makes women more susceptible to insulin resistance and breast cancer. Maintaining an ideal body weight reduces breast cancer risk.

Better nutrition, less sugar and alcohol, regular exercise, and staying at a healthy weight may not be glamorous, but not only does this seem to help protect us from breast cancer and other cancers, it's important to the prevention of heart disease and diabetes, two serious health concerns that affect women. Again, our food is our first medicine.

There are some supplements I often encourage patients to incorporate into their lifestyle. Green tea has been shown to be protective against breast cancer. Drinking 3 to 5 cups daily provides important hydration and powerful antioxidants. Omega-3 fatty acids from fish oil beneficially modify the body's inflammation pathways which is necessary for the immune system to work well. I usually recommend 1000mg to 3000mg daily of a reputable brand. Vitamin D3 research has shown it not only is important to the prevention of breast cancer but improves the outcome for women diagnosed with breast cancer. I've checked over 500 patients in my practice for their vitamin D3 levels. Only 75 women had optimal levels. I suggest women have their physicians include vitamin D3 with their regular lab work, and supplement appropriately.

Lastly, our increasing breast cancer awareness over the last 25 years has benefited women with more research, information, and treatment options, but it has also contributed to our fears. On one hand, our society perceives our breasts as an integral aspect of motherhood and sensuality and on the other hand, as a potential center for disease. I encourage women to dispassionately regard the overwhelming amount of information not only about breast cancer but many other health challenges. This includes any medical information and advice that comes from the internet. We need to know what holds true for us personally, so we can embrace our bodies and health with respect and optimism, not fear. A lifestyle and attitude of calm awareness empowers our minds and bodies in every way and creates an immense potential for healing. We can all give ourselves this gift no matter where we are in our journey to health.