

Breast cancer support

Educate yourself in honour of breast cancer awareness month and beyond

Woman's Day (New Zealand) · 27 Sep 2021 · 68

Approximately nine New Zealanders are diagnosed with breast cancer every day – that's more than 3300 people each year. One in nine women are diagnosed with breast cancer in their lifetimes, meaning you or someone you know could be affected by this disease.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Medical oncologist Belinda Kiely explains that the symptoms of breast cancer depend on where the tumour is and how quickly it's growing in the breast. "Most people diagnosed with breast cancer are diagnosed with early stage disease, where the cancer is contained in the breast and the lymph nodes in the armpit," she says. "Many people will have no symptoms and the breast cancer is found during a screening mammogram." There are some signs to watch out for though, including a lump or thickening in the breast, changes in the size or shape of the breast, changes to the nipple, including redness, ulcers or discharge, changes to the skin, including redness, rash or dimpling, or swelling or lumps in the armpit.

TREATMENT

"There are a number of different breast cancer treatments. The number and type of treatments recommended depends on the type and stage of the cancer as well as the age, health and preferences of the patient," explains Belinda. Early stage breast cancer treatment can include a lumpectomy to remove the tumour or a mastectomy to remove the breast. Chemotherapy, radiotherapy and hormone blocking therapy can also be used.

PREVENTION

Unfortunately, there are many risk factors for breast cancer that we have no control over, like being a woman or getting older. However, there are lifestyle factors that can be changed or managed to help prevent a risk of breast cancer.

"The following lifestyle factors have been linked to a higher risk of breast cancer: drinking alcohol, being overweight – especially after menopause – and lack of physical activity," says Belinda. "Minimising alcohol, keeping to a healthy weight range and exercising regularly can help reduce your risk of developing breast cancer."

THE IMPACT

The diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer can be overwhelming and frightening, with consequences that impact your life for month or years. Belinda explains that the longer term side effects include early menopause, infertility, bone and muscle pain, peripheral neuropathy (pain and numbness in the hands and feet), memory and concentration problems, fatigue, anxiety and depression. All of these can have a significant impact on relationships with partners, friends and family.

The side effects can also see a change to sex life and libido. “Many of the treatments for breast cancer cause menopausal side effects, which impact sexual function such as vaginal dryness and pain, and reduced libido,” tells Belinda. There are ways to help improve many of these problems, so it is important for women to talk to their oncologist, breast nurse or GP. “Women should not be embarrassed to talk about the impact the cancer is having on their relationships and sex lives,” Belinda adds.

SUPPORT THOSE AROUND YOU

When it comes to being there for friends or family living with breast cancer, it’s best to avoid saying that everything will be OK.

“It is important to listen to people and allow them to talk about what is happening, and how it makes them feel and how it makes you feel,” says Belinda. “Offer practical help such as driving to or accompanying them to medical appointments, assistance with cleaning, shopping, meals and childcare.”