



Is breast cancer risk just being hyped for unnecessary testing?

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There is a fine line between advocacy and creating a scare. A number of women with average risk (one member of the family affected with breast cancer over the age of 40) get genetic testing done. It is expensive (at about ₹50,000), and unnecessary, especially without adequate genetic counselling. Here are the main myths about the disease, dispelled.

MYTH We know well what causes breast cancer

FACT We do not know what causes breast cancer. There are, however, well recognized risk factors. Being a woman and increasing age are the 2 most important factors. Other known risk factors are: previously diagnosed breast cancer; a strong

family history; the early onset of menstrual period (before age 12); late menopause (after age 55); not having children and having a first child after age 30; not breast-feeding; long-term use of hormone replacement therapy and obesity (particularly after menopause).

MYTH Most breast lumps are cancers

FACT Nine out of 10 breast lumps are not cancerous. However, it is vital to investigate the breast lump by way of triple assessment (clinical breast examination by a specialist, bilateral mammogram, and ultrasound-guided core needle biopsy) in order to obtain a definitive diagnosis.

MYTH A breast self-examination is what one needs for early detection

FACT A breast self examination (BSE) is a check for lumps, done at the same time each month. Breast awareness, which has now replaced BSE, is about becoming familiar with the breasts and the way they change throughout a woman's life. It is a concept that encourages women to know how their breasts look and feel normally so that they gain confidence about noticing any change which might help detect breast cancer early. Here is the 5-point code: know what is normal for you; know what changes to look and feel for; note the look and feel; report any changes to your doctor without delay; have a screening mammogram (X-ray of the breast) every year if you are 40 and over.

MYTH A mammography is a radiation hazard

FACT A mammography involves a tiny dose of radiation. The health risk is insignificant. The radiation dose is the same as a dental X-ray. The full-field digital mammography has revolutionized early detection. Its advantages: superior accuracy, and less radiation and discomfort.

MYTH A faulty gene is what causes breast cancer

FACT Only 5-10% of breast cancers are likely to carry faulty gene/s (BRCA1 & BRCA2).

Those with the genes have a significant lifetime risk of getting the disease. Not everyone who has BRCA gets breast cancer. So consider the test only if there is a significant family history. If the blood test is positive, the lifetime risk of developing breast and ovarian cancer is high (50-85% for breast cancer and 15-45% for ovarian cancer). You are in the high-risk group if one or more close relatives has had breast cancer before the age of 40; two or more close

relatives have had breast cancer at any age; close relatives who have had ovarian cancer; one close relative who has had breast cancer in both breasts (bilateral) or who has had breast and ovarian cancer; a male relative who's had breast cancer (yes, men get it too). Genetic counselling is a must before getting a genetic test.

MYTH Surgery is the only option if I am at high risk.

FACT Although surgery by way of removal of both breasts (bilateral mastectomy) and ovaries and fallopian

tubes (bilateral salpingo-oophorectomy) before natural menopause, has shown to reduce the risk of both breast and ovarian cancers, there are other well-established non-surgical options. These include taking a drug, Tamoxifen, for 5 years along with close monitoring. The latter is done through a combination of MRIs of the breasts and bilateral mammograms alternating every 6 months from the age of 25 or 10 years earlier than the age at which the cancer was diagnosed in the youngest member of the family. ■



The full field digital mammography helps catch a cancer at the earliest stages, especially in young women with dense breasts.

SHUTTERSTOCK/INDIAPICTURE

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