

Dr P RAGHU RAM



Don't panic at the sight of that lump

When women go to their doctor with a breast problem, it is most likely to be a normal change related to

breast development or ageing. These changes include tenderness/pain, lumps and nipple problems.

All these changes are linked to variations in hormones like estrogen and progesterone. At times, these changes go beyond what is normal and are diagnosed as

benign breast conditions. For example, breast pain linked to menstrual cycle is common and usually normal.

Geetha (name changed), a 40-year-old woman, noticed a lump in her left breast. She was worried it could be cancer but after an evaluation by a process called triple assessment, she was relieved to know that it was not a cancerous lump.

Triple assessment includes clinical breast examination, breast



ultrasound scan) and ultrasound guided needle biopsy of the lump. This process accurately excludes or indeed confirms breast cancer in most circumstances, thus spar-

ing the need for a woman to have open surgery to obtain a diagnosis.

To this day there are some common myths associated with breast cancer.

Myth: Most breast lumps are cancers.

Fact: Nine out of 10 breast lumps are not cancers. However, it is important to evaluate the lump for a definitive diagnosis instead of assuming that it is harmless.

Another patient, Mary (name changed), a 20-year-old executive

has a family history of breast cancer. Her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer at 70. Mary is very worried that she has a higher risk of developing breast cancer.

Myth: Family history of breast cancer is a major risk factor.

Fact: Majority of women with breast cancer do not have a family history. Strong family history (genetic predisposition) accounts for only 10 per cent of cancers.

Dr P Raghu Ram is a specialist in breast diseases

health

Nothing beats breast feeding

On the occasion of World Breast Feeding Week experts advocate the benefits of breast milk

Dr P. RAGHU RAM



Bottle-milk is no substitute to breast milk. Breast milk is uniquely superior to bottle-fed milk, in more than one way.

The nutritional composition of breast milk is best suited to the baby's needs. It has got the right proportion of nutrients like water, proteins, carbohydrates, cholesterol and antibodies, which create immunity and protect the baby against infections.

Breast milk is easily digestible. It takes two hours to digest breast milk when compared to the four hours for formula milk. Thirdly, there is evidence to suggest that breastfed babies are less likely to be obese in later life. Bottle-fed babies are usually more 'chubby' and the fact remains that a 'chubby baby' does not necessarily mean a 'healthy baby'.

DID YOU KNOW?

- The size of the breast has no bearing on the amount of milk produced.
- Breast infections should not curtail breast feeding. In fact, it keeps the ducts patent and may help cure the infection.
- Ice packs should not be used to treat breast infection as it can harden the milk and make matters worse.
- A mammogram should not be done during pregnancy and lactation.

Breast feeding helps the mother too. Women return to their pre-pregnancy shape and weight quicker if they breast feed. Also, they are more likely to be healthier than those who don't breast feed. The WHO theme for this year's breast feeding week is to consider it as a life saving intervention.

Doctors suggest that breast milk is the healthiest form of milk for babies. Besides nourishing babies with nutrition, breast feeding also prevents breast cancer. There is now strong evidence to suggest that the longer a woman breast feeds, the less likely she would be to develop breast cancer. Though breast-

feeding cannot prevent breast cancer, it reduces the risk.

However, breast feeding is not recommended when the mother is receiving chemotherapy since the drugs can be secreted in the milk which can harm the child.

Although the incidence of breast cancer in women who breast feed is lower than in those who don't, women must be aware of the changes that pregnancy and lactation create. A lactating breast feels full and lumpy. Although these are normal changes, being 'breast aware' is absolutely important even during pregnancy and lactation. Should there be any new changes, a specialist should be consulted to rule out any abnormality.

Dr P. Raghu Ram is the director, KIMS-USHALAKSHMI Centre for Breast Diseases, Hyderabad



MRI not needed in breast screening

Dr P. RAGHURAM



In spite of the growing awareness about breast cancer, the myths surrounding

breast cancer are worrisome. One of the most common myths is that routine breast screening for women of all age groups is a must. On the contrary, breast screening is effective only in women above the age of 40.

It is also a myth that mammography is 100 per cent accurate in detecting breast cancer. The fact is mammograms are the most efficient way of detecting breast cancer early. Like other screening tests, they are not perfect. The accuracy of mammography is around 85 per cent, since it is very difficult to see certain cancers even through a mammogram and in some cases they cannot be seen at all.

Another common myth is that breast feeding prevents cancer. However, it

only reduces the risk.

An MRI of the breast is not recommended for a routine breast screening, it is very useful in evaluating women with breast implants. This is because the accuracy of mammography and ultrasound is limited by the presence of implants. After an earlier breast cancer surgery, there may be ambiguity surrounding a mammogram or ultrasound, which is why an MRI is more useful. Also, in young women with a very high risk of developing breast cancer, MRI may be considered as an option for breast screening.

A breast self examination (BSE) conducted on a monthly basis by a woman is recommended. Being breast aware is about becoming familiar with the breasts and the way they change throughout a woman's life. It helps a woman identify how her breasts look and feel normally and any change may be noticed immediately. While there is no set way to examine your breast, one thing is important — to feel all parts of the breast, from high up on

front of the chest, down and around into your armpit.

Breast awareness 5-point code

- Know what is normal for you.
- Know what changes

- to look and feel for.
- Look and feel.
- Report any changes to your doctor without delay.
- Have mammogram (X-ray of the breast) every year if you are aged 40 and above.

SELF EXAMINATION OF THE BREAST SHOULD BE CONDUCTED EVERY MONTH



The writer is the director, KIMS-USHALAKSHMI Centre for Breast Diseases, Hyderabad

International Breast Cancer Awareness Month



Early detection of cancer is must

Dr P. RAGHURAM



World over, October is recognised as the breast cancer awareness month. It provides a plat-

form for NGOs and charities to increase awareness of the disease, spread message about the importance of early detection of breast cancer and also raise funds for research into its cause, prevention and cure. It is also an opportunity to support cancer survivors.

It's important now to know about chemo and hormone therapies, which have been instrumental in fighting the disease. Chemotherapy essentially acts by destroying cells, particularly cancer cells, which multiply rapidly. But since even normal cells are constantly dividing and growing, they too can be affected. This can cause side effects.

The kind of side effects varies with each individual. Drugs have different effects and the same dosage and combination can affect different people quite differently. Mouth ulcers, nausea, vomiting, hair loss and fatigue are some of the common side effects. Some of these can be minimised.

As chemotherapy can affect healthy blood cells, patients may be prone to infections and anaemia. Hence a blood test before each chemotherapy cycle is recommended.

Chemotherapy can also affect the ovum development, which in turn can affect fertility. Some women find that their periods become irregular or stop temporarily.

The contraceptive pill is not usually recommended for women whose breast cancer is hormone sensitive due to the possible risk of hormonal



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stimulation of the cancer.

As some breast cancer cells are stimulated to grow by the hormones oestrogen and progesterone, a test to discover whether the cancer cells are sensitive to them is conducted after surgery. This is known as Hormone Receptor Test. If the result is positive, it means that hormone therapy would be potentially beneficial to the patient.

This is also known as endocrine therapy, treats the whole body and prevents the hormones from stimulating the growth of cancer cells.

Hormone therapy is generally started after surgery, but if chemotherapy is part of the treatment, then it is used after completion of chemotherapy. This is because the effect of chemotherapy can be impaired when administered along with hormone therapy.

The common side effects include hot flushes, night sweats and mood swings. There can also be weight gain and joint pains. If the side effects are severe, then the specialist may consider switching from one hormone therapy drug to another.

The writer is the director, KIMS-Ushalakshmi Centre for Breast Diseases, Hyderabad