Breast Cancer Awareness Month!
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October 2020 is National Breast Cancer Awareness Month. It is a reminder for both men and women that monthly breast exams should be part of your monthly routine.

What is breast cancer?
Breast cancer is a type of cancer that starts in the breast but can metastasize to other parts of the body. The cells in the breast usually form a tumor that can be felt as a lump, or seen in an x-ray. Breast cancer is the second most common cancer among women in the United States. Every year in the United States, there are over 250,000 cases of breast cancer diagnosed in women, and about 2,300 in men. Black women have a higher rate of death from breast cancer than white women. Breast cancer cells can spread to other parts of the body and grow there. This is called metastasis. Even when this happens, it’s still called breast cancer.

Symptoms of breast cancer:
While some people have symptoms of breast cancer, others do not have any signs or symptoms. Most common symptoms are:
- New lump in the breast or underarm.
- Thickening or swelling of part of the breast.
- Irritation or dimpling of breast skin.
- Redness or flaky skin in the nipple area or the breast.
- Pulling in of the nipple or pain in the nipple area.
- Nipple discharge other than breast milk, including blood.
- Any change in the size or the shape of the breast.
These symptoms may be present with other conditions that are not cancer. If you experience any of them, be sure to see your provider right away.

Risk factors
Breast cancer risk is influenced by a combination of factors. Talk to your doctor on how to lower your risks and what screening methods are best for you.

Some risks can’t be changed:
- Age: risk is higher after 50.
- Genetic risk: women with gene mutations such as BRCA1 and BRCA2 have a higher risk of breast and ovarian cancer.

- Reproductive history: Starting your menses before age 12 and starting menopause after 55 exposes women to hormones longer, increasing risk of breast cancer.
- Dense breasts: These breast have more connective tissue, which makes it harder to detect tumors on a mammogram and increases cancer risk.
- Personal history of breast cancer or certain non-cancerous breast diseases: Women who’ve had breast cancer have an increased risk of getting cancer a second time.
- Family history of breast or ovarian cancer: Mother, sister or daughter, or multiple family members on either a woman’s mother’s or father’s side of the family who had breast or ovarian cancer increases their risk. First degree Male relatives also raises a woman’s risk of breast cancer.
- Previous treatment with radiation therapy: Radiation therapy to the chest or breast (such as treatment for Hodgkin’s lymphoma) before age 30.
- Women and Women whose mother took while pregnant Diethylstilbestrol (DES): A treatment given to some pregnant women in the United States from 1940 to 1971 to prevent miscarriages, are also at risk.

Risks that can be changed:
- Physical activity.
- Overweight or obesity after menopause.
- Hormonal therapy replacement as well as certain oral birth control.
- Reproductive history: First pregnancy after age 30, not breastfeeding, and/or never having a full-term pregnancy.
- Drinking alcohol: Risk is proportional to alcohol intake.
- Other factors: Smoking, chemical exposure that causes cancer and changes in hormonal balance.

Breast cancer screening
The United States Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) is an organization composed of doctors and disease experts who look at research on the best way to prevent diseases. They make recommendations on how to detect diseases early and how to avoid them as well. The USPSTF recommends that women from 50-74 years old with an average risk of breast cancer have a mammogram every two years. Women from 40 to 49 years old should talk to their health care provider on when to start and how often to get a mammogram.

Article continued and resources/references on reverse side.
Breast cancer screening tests

**Mammogram:** An x-ray of the breast. This is the best way to find breast cancer for many women. It helps to detect cancer in its early stages, before it is large enough to be felt and/or cause symptoms. Having regular mammograms lowers the risk of dying from breast cancer.

**Breast cancer magnetic resonance imaging (MRI):** This test uses magnets and radio waves that take pictures of the breast. This screening tool is used in conjunction with mammograms for women at high risk.

**Clinical breast exam:** Performed by a doctor or nurse using their own hands to feel for lumps or other changes.

**Breast self-exam:** Becoming familiar of how your breasts look and feel helps to notice changes in size, lumps, pain or other concerns.

Screening tests have the benefit of finding cancer early. Early detection helps in cancer treatment. But screening tests have benefits and risks, therefore talk to your doctor before getting a screening test.

If you’re diagnosed with breast cancer, your doctor can refer you to a breast specialist or surgeon. They will order additional tests to help determine the best treatment plan for you. Among the tests are:

- **Breast ultrasounds:** Sound waves make detailed pictures of the breast.
- **Diagnostic mammogram:** More detailed than a screening mammogram when it looks at abnormal lumps or areas in your breast.
- **Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI):** A detailed scan of areas inside the breast.
- **Biopsy:** Tissue and/or fluid is removed from the breast and looked under a microscope and perform more tests.

Staging of cancer

Once diagnosed, further testing may be needed to establish if the cancer has contained to the breast or has spread to other areas of your body. This is called staging and will help your doctors determine the kind of treatment that you need.

Treatment for breast cancer

Treatment depends on the kind of cancer and how far spread it is. Patients with breast cancer will often get more than one type of treatment.

- **Surgery:** to remove cancer tissue.
- **Chemotherapy:** medications that kill or shrink the size of the tumor or cancer cells. These can be administered as pills and/or intravenous drugs.
- **Hormonal therapy:** Blocks cancer cells from the hormones they need to grow.
- **Biological therapy:** Works along your immune system to fight cancer cells.
- **Radiation therapy:** Uses high energy rays to kill cancer cells.
- **Clinical trials:** New treatment options.
- **Complementary and alternative medicine:** Not standard cancer treatments. Complementary medicine is used in addition to standard treatments.
- **Alternative medicine:** Used instead of standard treatments.

Choosing your treatment can be a hard decision. Different specialty doctors will work together to treat breast cancer. Talk to your providers about the risks, benefits and side effects. Their ultimate goal is to improve your health.

Resources/References:
2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8 - Center for Disease Control and Prevention/Division of Cancer Prevention and Control/Cancer Home/Breast Cancer/Basic Information About Breast Cancer; reviewed September 14, 2020.