

Breast Cancer Awareness among women in India

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Cancer, a word that brings people down on their knees, driving fear into the hearts of everyone. It threatens to separate people from their true identities, taking over the reins of their life and shattering their soul. Many have battled this disease, all of them bravely, but it goes without saying that it is a powerful enemy. Cancer is caused by varied factors - the environment one is exposed to, the lifestyle one leads or something wholly out of one's control, one's genetics. It also manifests in different forms - lung cancer, colon cancer, leukemia and many others. October brings to us the Breast Cancer Awareness Month, and given that it is one of the most common forms of cancer that afflict people in India, we should aim to create awareness amongst the people in our lives about this disease. It starts off with the abnormal multiplication of cells, and it occurs more often in women than in men. Initial stages do not give many warning symptoms - but can be characterized through change in breast size or shape, tenderness, retraction or discharge. Not all these symptoms are linked to breast cancer, but it is paramount that one understands when the right time to get checked is, what the options available for recovery if affected are and how to go about with funding. Firstly, not a lot of men or women are aware that due to delay in the checking, breast cancer is discovered in the later and advanced stages. Post this, the chances of healing are reduced even with options for tumor removal like surgery, radiation or chemotherapy since the cancer cells can metastasize, i.e. - spread to other parts of the body. Why does it go unnoticed? Screening centers are unavailable in rural and other semi-urban areas at times, and people also ignore lumps until they get bigger or painful, by which time it is too late. Limited oncology specialist hospitals are also a cause and on top of the unbearable suffering that patients go through, they also have to bear financial distress. With mortality rates high at the later stages, the best way to deal with treatment is to prevent it before it reaches this point.

Given the state of affairs, we need to take small steps:

1. Self-Examination: Check for lumps on a regular basis
2. Schedule a visit to the Doctor: Clinical breast exam with mammogram and imaging tests should be conducted every few years, frequency should increase with age
3. Evaluate Genetic history: If BRCA1 or BRCA2 genes get mutated, there may be a higher chance of getting breast cancer. Getting tested and discussing genetic history with an oncologist would help prepare for the appropriate treatment options
4. Review policies surrounding preventive care and treatment: It is the need of the hour for correctly priced, specialized equipment and institutes with well-trained oncologists. Research also needs to be done to derive causes behind breast cancer

5. Funding: Treatment costs anywhere from 5 to 20 Lakhs, depending on the number of cycles and targeted therapy. Cancer treatments are rough on people, and not knowing when and who to approach for the right information adds to it. Apart from the Government of India releasing schemes like Rashtriya Arogya Nidhi which donates up to 2 Lakh Rupees per cancer patient, organizations such as the Tata Memorial Center, Niramai and Love Heals Cancer are working towards enabling cancer patients and survivors in adjusting to the trials that the disease brings. They do this by providing information for timely interventions, while ensuring patients' hard earned money is utilized the right way. They even help come up with payment plans and those who cannot afford these costly treatments. These initiatives prove that no one is alone in this journey.

While these are the initial steps towards keeping overall health in check, reducing the exposure to carcinogens in the diet and getting regular self-exams before the cancer spreads are also ways in which preventive measures can be taken. Fighting cancer is not just about maintaining a strong bodily front, but strengthening one's mind as well. As people, we are vulnerable from the day we are born - but in order to live a healthy life, it is necessary to be physically and mentally robust. Surrounding one with our loved ones and getting the needed support is also an exigency. When awareness is created about cancer, a lot of fear is generated as well. Not every lump is cancerous, and not every tumor is malignant. Self-examination, at least once a month goes a long way in identifying if there are any bodily changes that need a visit to the doctor. Let us follow these steps calmly and hope to prevent cancer soon in its entirety one day and come up with action plans for the suitable eradication of the suffering this disease causes.