



ELDERCARE PROGRAMME

BREAST CANCER

Breast cancer is the kind of cancer that develops from the breast cells. The cancerous tumour can spread to other parts of the body. It is the most common invasive cancer among women worldwide.

According to the National Cancer Registry, 1 in 27 women in South Africa will be diagnosed with breast cancer in their lifetime. While breast cancer is common among women, men can also develop breast cancer.

NEWSLETTER

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This sheet is for your general information and is not a substitute for medical advice. You should contact your physician or other healthcare provider with any questions about your health, treatment or care.

Causes of breast cancer

Causes of breast cancer are not known. However, there is a list of risk factors that increase the likelihood of a woman developing breast cancer, as shown below:

- » **Age** – older women (after menopause) are at risk.
- » **Genetics** – people with a family history of breast or ovarian cancer are at risk of developing breast cancer.
- » **Previous personal history of breast cancer** – disease recurrence.
- » **Having had some types of breast lumps (non-cancerous)** – these may become cancerous at a later stage.
- » **Longer period of exposure to oestrogen** – women who started menstruating early and enter menopause later than usual are at higher risk.
- » **Obesity** – post-menopausal obese women generally have higher levels of oestrogen prior to the onset of menopause which increases the risk.

- » **Alcohol consumption** – the more alcohol women drink, the higher the risk of developing breast cancer.
- » **Radiation exposure** – recurrent exposure to radiation may raise a woman's chance of developing breast cancer.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF BREAST CANCER:

- Lump in the breast
- Pain in the armpit or breast that does not seem to be related to the woman's menstrual period
- Pitting or redness of the skin of the breast, like the skin of an orange
- Rash around or on the nipple
- Swelling in one of the armpits
- Thickened tissue in the breast

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF BREAST CANCER (CONTINUED):

- Discharge (other than breast milk) from the nipple
- Change in the appearance of the nipple (i.e. it may become sunken or inverted)
- Change in the size or the shape of the breast
- Peeling, scaling or flaking of the nipple skin or breast skin.



Diagnosing breast cancer

- » **Physical breast examination.**
- » **Mammogram** – used for breast cancer screening, if any abnormality is detected, further examinations may be done to rule out breast cancer.
- » **Breast ultrasound** – to determine whether the lump is a solid mass or fluid-filled cyst.
- » **Biopsy** – a sample of tissue is taken from the lump and sent to the laboratory for analysis.
- » **Breast Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI)** to detect the extent of the cancer.

Treatment of breast cancer

Factors such as: the type of breast cancer; the extent of the breast cancer; patient's overall health status; the age of the patient; and the patient's own preferences are taken into consideration.

The main breast cancer treatments are:

- Surgery (removal of the lump or of the infected breast tissue, depending on the extent of the disease)
- Radiation therapy
- Chemotherapy
- Hormone therapy
- Biological therapy (targeted drug therapy).

CONCLUSION

With all the methods of treatment that are available and accessible these days, breast cancer is not a 'dreadful' disease. It is advisable that every woman should perform a physical breast examination regularly and that women over the age of 40 should also have a mammogram done at least

once every year. Breast cancer can be treated when detected early.

BP Medical Aid Society allows one mammogram per beneficiary aged 40 years and older per annum. For beneficiaries younger than 40 years, the test is subject to motivation and prior approval.

