



The long struggle

Breast cancer may be rare among the younger female population, but awareness from an early age is the key to beating the disease, says Dr Andreas Kopp

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For many young women, the threat of breast cancer is the last thing on their mind. It may be the main cause of death for women between the ages of 45 and 55 globally, but the disease is relatively rare among younger women. This, however, does not mean individuals can afford to discount the risk of developing breast cancer while in their younger years, argues Dr Andreas Kopp from Dubai Healthcare City’s German Clinic.

As a specialist in obstetrics and gynecology and oncology, Kopp is keen to point out that despite the perception that breast cancer is a mature person’s condition, the incidence rate of the disease among women between 20 and 34 years of age is a considerable 12%. And with most cancers, the key to beating breast cancer is early diagnosis. “Detecting breast cancer early, before it has grown very large or spread to other sites, is important,” he says.

“The earlier a breast cancer is detected, the better the chance it can be cured. Every woman should examine her breasts monthly at the beginning of her menstrual cycle. In addition all women should have regular breast examinations by a doctor at least once a year.” There are a variety of methods for screening for breast cancer, says Kopp. But in younger women ultrasound is the most effective as the breast is denser than in postmenopausal women, which makes it

difficult for x-rays to determine small cancers.

Due to its prevalence, there are relatively high levels of awareness about breast cancer among more mature women. When a younger individual is unfortunate enough to be diagnosed with the disease, there will inevitably be a period of adjustment and considerable anxiety over what the implications will be for the rest of her life.

“A diagnosis of breast cancer brings on confusion, uncertainty, fear, and unsolicited advice and can make a woman feel she is losing control of her life,” advises Kopp. “Unfortunately, myths and misconceptions about breast cancer are common and can cause a woman unnecessary fear and confusion. Young women constitute a minority of breast cancer patients, she adds, so it is natural that they have distinct concerns and issues compared with older women, including queries regarding fertility, contraception and pregnancy. Also, they are more likely than older women to have questions regarding potential side effects of therapy and risk of relapse or a new primary. In addition, many will have symptoms associated with treatment and they will be anxious to learn how best to deal with these problems.

“These women should be treated by a gynecologic oncologist who is not only trained in the treatment of breast cancer but

also in reproductive medicine and general gynecology,” argues Kopp. “And he or she should be aware of current management of breast cancer, the options for women at increased genetic risk, the prognosis of patients with early stage breast cancer and how adjuvant systemic treatments may impact reproductive function.”

When dealing with a diagnosis of breast cancer in a younger patient, it is vital that a multidisciplinary approach is taken to deal with all of the disease’s implications.

Developing a comprehensive treatment plans is the most important step to combating the disease. “The treatment plan outlines the type of surgery that will be used to remove the tumor and any additional therapy, such as radiation therapy, chemotherapy, or hormonal therapy, that will be given,” he concludes. “In modern oncology treatment plans have to be individualized and should include also integrative and biologic treatment strategies in addition to the standard treatment options.” ■

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