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WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT BREAST CANCER

Breast cancer is a malignant tumor that forms in the tissues of the breast. It occurs when abnormal cells in the breast tissue divide and multiply uncontrollably, forming a mass/tumor. Breast cancer is not one disease, but rather a group of several subtypes that develop and spread in different ways. The major subtypes are named for the cells where they originate - ductal carcinoma (inside mammary ducts) and lobular carcinoma (in mammary lobules). If untreated and allowed to grow and spread, it can metastasize (spread) to other parts of the body through the lymphatic system and bloodstream. Common sites of metastases include bones, lungs, liver, and brain. This occurs when cancer cells break away and travel to distant organs.

Here are some of the major risk factors for developing breast cancer:

- Gender** - Simply being a woman is the single largest risk factor, as breast cancer is much more common in women than men.
- Age** - Risk increases as a woman gets older. Most breast cancers are diagnosed after age 50.
- Genetic factors** - Having mutations in genes like BRCA1 and BRCA2, a strong family history, and certain genetic syndromes increase risk significantly.
- Reproductive history** - Early menstruation, late menopause, never having children or having first child after 30 years increases risk.
- Breast density** - Dense breast tissue makes cancers harder to detect on mammograms and is a risk factor itself.
- Obesity** - Postmenopausal women who are overweight or obese have a higher risk, especially if the weight is around the midsection.
- Alcohol use** - Even light-to-moderate alcohol intake (1-2 drinks per day) is associated with a small increased risk.
- Radiation exposure** - Radiation treatments to the chest area, especially at a young age, increases long-term risk.

Hormone therapy - Long-term postmenopausal hormone therapy, especially estrogen + progestin, may carry a slightly higher risk.

Lack of physical activity - Less active women face slightly higher risks than more active women.

Here are some ways to help prevent breast cancer:

Maintain a healthy weight. Losing excess pounds lowers breast cancer risk, especially after menopause.

Be physically active regularly. Aim for at least 30 minutes per day of moderate exercise.

Limit alcohol intake. The less alcohol consumed, the lower the risk.

Breastfeed if possible. Longer duration of breastfeeding is associated with reduced risk.

Get mammograms as recommended. Screening increases early detection of tumors.

Minimize hormone exposures. Limit use of hormone supplements like birth control pills.

Eat healthy. Adopt an overall nutritious diet with lots of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.

Manage stress in healthy ways. Chronic stress may fuel cancer development/progression.

Don't smoke or use tobacco. Smoking is an established risk factor.

Protect skin from UV damage. Wear sunscreen and clothing to reduce melanoma risk, a type of cancer linked to breast cancer risk.

Symptoms can include a new lump or mass in the breast, swelling of all or part of the breast, skin irritation or dimpling, breast or nipple pain, nipple retraction, redness or scaling of the nipple or breast skin.

Screening tests like mammograms, MRIs and ultrasounds can help detect breast cancer early before symptoms appear. Early detection increases survival odds. If a mass is found, a biopsy is needed to determine if cancer is present and the grade, stage, and other characteristics.

Treatment depends on various factors but may involve surgery, radiation therapy, chemotherapy, hormone therapy, targeted therapy.

Prognosis depends on the cancer type, stage at detection, grade, tumor markers, and responsiveness to treatment. Overall, a 5-year survival rate is 90% if found early. Supportive care focuses on managing side effects from treatment and helping cope psychologically. A healthy lifestyle can also help recovery.

Ongoing screening and evaluation are recommended after treatment ends to monitor for recurrence which can occur years later in some cases.

Survivorship care focuses on monitoring health after treatment, managing late effects, ongoing screenings, support groups and a healthy lifestyle.

Recurrence rates are highest in the first 5 years but can happen many years later. Lifelong follow up with a doctor is important after treatment.