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Breast Cancer In Black Women: A Cautionary Tale | Body & Soul

(www.BlackDoctor.org) -- Whenever a stranger is lurking around us or our children, our instincts go on high alert, and we instantly go into our hyper-vigilant protection mode, right? Well my sistahs, breast cancer is a VERY dangerous stranger lurking around our community, and it's taking up residence in too many of our homes.

According to the National Cancer Institute (NCI), "Breast cancer is the most commonly diagnosed cancer among African American women. An estimated 19,540 new cases of breast cancer are expected to occur among African American women in 2009."

Sadly, the NCI further estimates that "6,020 deaths from breast cancer are expected to occur among African American women in 2009. It is the second most common cause of cancer death among African American women, surpassed only by lung cancer."

Just stop for a moment and take that in. Nearly 20,000 of us and our grandmothers, mothers, aunts, sisters, daughters, nieces and other loved ones will be stricken. More than 6,000 voices silenced. More than 6,000 families shattered. More than 6,000 funerals conducted.

We can no longer sit quietly, thinking this ominous "stranger" won't come our way. It can happen to any of us! It already is!

Know the risks

One of the most important steps in subduing breast cancer among African American women is to know the changeable risk factors:

- **Obesity.** According to the American Cancer Society, being overweight or obese is one of the most carcinogenic (cancer causing) risk factors for breast and cervical cancer. (See WHOLE for more details about obesity.)
- **Poor eating habits.** Diets high in fat, sugar, and sodium, aside from causing excessive weight gain, can suppress the immune system and make you more vulnerable to cancers
- **Sedentary lifestyle.** Lack of even moderate exercise can inhibit your body's ability to excrete harmful toxins
- **Drinking alcohol.** Even drinking just one glass of alcohol each day can increase your risk. Is it really worth it?

Do any of these behaviors sound familiar? You might be at risk! Please be sure to read ALL the articles in this issue of WHOLE and follow the links we've provided for ideas about making health-affirming changes in your lifestyle.

Young sistahs are especially vulnerable

I recently heard of a ten-year-old sistah being diagnosed with breast cancer. TEN YEARS OLD!!! So often we think of breast cancer as a disease that only strikes older women. Not so.

Breast cancer is the leading cause of cancer death in women ages 15 to 54. Recent studies reveal the distressing realities about young women and breast cancer*:

- One in every 229 women between the ages of 30 and 39 will be diagnosed with breast cancer in the next 10 years
- When younger, premenopausal, black women get breast cancer, they are more than twice as likely as older women, black or white, to get an aggressive breast cancer subtype
- Breast cancer patients 35 years old and younger have higher rates of their cancer returning after treatment than older women patients with the same stage of cancer, and their risk of recurrence is greatly impacted by the type of treatment they received
- Many young women and their doctors are unaware that they are at risk for breast cancer.
- There is no effective breast cancer screening tool for women 40 years old and under.

One young breast cancer survivor who is sounding the alarm is Maimah Karmo. Diagnosed when she was 32 years old, Ms. Karmo found her lump a year earlier. However, she encountered a doctor who assured her she was too young to have breast cancer. By the time of her diagnosis months later, the tumor was substantially larger.

Fortunately, the power-house native of Liberia survived, and is thriving at the helm of the Tiger Lily Foundation, an organization she founded especially to support young breast cancer survivors. From the moment of diagnosis, Tiger Lily Foundation provides online and in-person support such as comfort bags with special skin-care products, a warm blanket to use during chemo treatments, and healthy meal resources.

A special focus of Tiger Lily Foundation is "Early Act", new proposed federal legislation on early cancer education and treatment support for young women diagnosed with breast cancer. To learn more, visit the Tiger Lily Foundation. We also recommend you visit the Young Survivors Coalition for additional information and support created specifically for young women.

An Aggressive Triple Threat

Much has been reported recently about a particularly "bad actor" called Triple Negative Breast Cancer ("TNBC"). This especially aggressive sub type of breast cancer is called Triple Negative (also known as "Basal-like") because it lacks estrogen, progesterone, and HER2 receptors. Lacking these three receptors means this form of breast cancer will not respond to hormonal therapies such as tamoxifen, nor medications that target HER2 such as Herceptin. Treatment options for TNBC are narrowed to surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation therapy.

Research over the last few years has revealed that TNBC is especially aggressive with young African American women under the age of 35. What is frustrating--as in Ms. Karmo's case--is that few doctors recognize the breast cancer risk in young women. Moreover, current best-practice protocols in breast cancer screening recommend diagnostic tools such as mammography only for women over 40 (see the American Cancer Society recommendations for more information). As a result, many young women are diagnosed at a much later stage and have a much poorer survival rate. For more information on TNBC, see our fact sheet "Triple Negative Breast Cancer," and visit the Triple Negative Breast Cancer Foundation.

Breast cancer is not just a lump

Did you know that breast cancer doesn't always show itself as a lump? Inflammatory Breast Cancer ("IBC") is another type of breast cancer that is now beginning to be understood much better. It is rare, but is known to emerge very quickly--sometimes overnight! It produces symptoms such as redness, swelling,

very warm/hot to the touch, discharge, inverted nipples, discoloration of the areola (the skin around the nipple) and tenderness.

IBC is often mistaken for a mammary infection for which antibiotics are prescribed. However, if the symptoms don't abate, it is essential to follow-up with the doctor right away. For more information on IBC, see our fact sheet "Inflammatory Breast Cancer," and visit the Inflammatory Breast Cancer Foundation.

Be an Advocate

Early detection of breast cancer affords you the best options for treatment and survival. That is why it is incumbent upon each one of us to: know our bodies; be assertive with our doctors and insist on adequate follow up and access to advanced diagnostic screenings; maintain a healthy lifestyle (see "What You Can Do" for specific tips); and encourage sistahfriends, family, and colleagues to do the same.

Bottom line, your breast health is literally in your hands. Please take good care of your "girls!"

BDO (www.BlackDoctor.org) is the World's largest and most comprehensive online health resource specifically targeted to African Americans.