

HEALTH

Breast Cancer and Hispanic Women in America

By Millie Elia, ANP-BC, CHWC

As you probably already know, October is Breast Cancer Awareness month. But did you also know that when speaking specifically of Hispanic women here in America, breast cancer is the #1 cause of cancer related deaths? According to sites like cancer.org we are still affected less than non-Hispanic whites or African Americans, but that should not lull us into a false sense of security as it still has the greatest mortality rate of all cancers for our women and as such should be considered with equal consideration and levity.

The reason for this is not entirely clear as the term “Hispanic” is actually a wide label that encompasses a very heterogeneous population with variations in foods, and customs. Interestingly, looking even deeper within the Hispanic communities, the subgroups of Puerto Rican , Mexican , and Cuban women have the highest likelihood to die from the disease (in that order)

<https://www.hindawi.com/journals/jce/2016/8784040/>

What is known is that reports have shown that compared to non-Hispanic white women, Hispanic women have lower rates of mammography use and are often diagnosed at younger ages. There is speculation that in broad terms across the country lower insurance coverage and/or access to health care could impact knowledge of disease and along with this then disease prevention which could be contributing to its prevalence in our communities.

Vital health information should include knowing common risk factors, signs and symptoms associated with breast cancer and equally important: prevention.



Risk factors include being age 55 or greater, being female (although rarer, men can still develop the disease), family history of the disease especially among 1st degree relatives like mothers, sisters and daughters, having had cancer before, race and ethnicity (non-Hispanic white and African American women have higher rates of the disease), having dense breast tissue, early onset of menstruation before 12 years of age, and late menopause after 55.

There are some lifestyle factors that are important considerations as well. Being overweight or obese after menopause, being generally sedate, not having ever given birth or giving birth after being 30 years old, and in some women taking birth control or hormone replacement therapy may increase their risk.

Signs to be aware of, usually include a hard-painless lump but can also be painful, swelling of all or part of a breast (even if no distinct lump is felt), Skin irritation or dimpling, breast or nipple pain, nipple retraction (turning inward), redness, scaliness, or thickening of the nipple or breast skin, nipple discharge (other than breast milk).

With regards to prevention it is imperative that community leaders speak out on ways people can empower themselves and improve their health. I was fortunate enough to have spoken to Francena Amparo, Assistant Minority Leader of the Dutchess County, NY Legislator - Dist. 14 on ways she believes people can stay healthy. She states "I believe in the importance of maintaining a healthy lifestyle. This involves finding ways to reduce inflammation like minimizing surgery, processed foods and alcohol, while increasing fruits, vegetables, and water. I believe emotional well-being is also critical to healthy lifestyle along with keeping active." Her statements are well rooted in the science of preventative medicine which research shows us can absolutely impact our overall health positively. Specifically, regarding breast cancer, I would also add extended breastfeeding has been shown to be correlated with reduced risks of breast cancer as well, and by age 45 women should be getting yearly mammograms (earlier if there are known risk factors).



Besides County Legislator Francena Amparo, I also had the opportunity and pleasure of interviewing Ms. Doreen Vargas who is a cancer survivor herself. Her story is one of inspiration and hope. She is actually a 2-time survivor and a Puerto Rican woman raised here in NY. She was initially diagnosed at the young age of 34, and as the first person in her family.

Her first diagnosis came in 2004 after finding a lump in her breast during a self-breast exam. After being seen at a local clinic she was referred to Bronx Lebanon Hospital where after a aspiration, mammogram and sonogram she received her official diagnosis which turned out to be stage IIB tumor classification. She asked for a second opinion and was seen at Montefiore Medical Center where her diagnosis was reconfirmed. She ultimately decided to receive treatment at Bronx Lebanon, however although she worked 3 jobs at that time, she did not receive medical coverage from any of them.

Luckily, she was referred by a staff member to the Susan G. Komen foundation and received funding for the lumpectomy she would require as part of her treatment plan. Her story became more complicated when a week after completing 6 cycles of chemo she suffered a stroke that left her paralyzed on the right side of her body, and unable to speak. Once admitted to Montefiore medical center she was admitted to the ICU and began her yearlong battle back to recovery requiring occupational therapy and physical therapy to walk and talk again. She states that through her devastation she began to feel hope again after her sister and aunt participated in her honor in the American Cancer Society's stride against breast cancer walk.

Although she was still recovering from her stroke she gained enough strength to continue on with her cancer treatment and began radiation - 3 months after finishing chemo. She diligently continued to follow up with her doctors, get yearly mammograms and to do self-breast exams. However, in April of 2015 she developed a new diagnosis of breast cancer now to both breasts with the largest tumor being stage I. By this time, she had Medicaid and

decided with her physicians to have bilateral mastectomies performed which were done at Montefiore, followed by another 4 cycles of chemotherapy. She attributes having a support system like her family and local groups in helping her through her ordeal.

Currently, while she has always been active in the gym, she admits to having risk factors and lifestyle choices which can negatively impact her health such as type 2 diabetes, drinks alcohol and smokes socially, and states her diet could be improved. But her past experiences and deep insight allow her to consider these along with ways to make healthier lifestyle and diet choices as she moves forward. Now she participates in walks with the American Cancer Society or Susan G. Komen in support of others whose lives have also been affected by this devastating disease. Doreen is also an advocate for genetic testing (BRACA) which can help family members understand their own risk for developing breast cancer. She as well as 2 of her sisters have done them.

It is important to note that due to the development of breakthroughs in this area through the years there has been higher risks revealed in tests done more recently. This new knowledge can impact the survival rates of patients as well as their family members. For this reason, Doreen advises those who had testing done a few years ago to consider repeating them as newer testing may be even more revealing. She is an advocate for conducting self-breast exams (SBE) and suggests that we should be teaching girls at a younger age to begin doing them as a normal part of their bath time routine.

I'd like to end with some valuable community resource information. For women who need low cost or free mammogram's info please consider contacting your local **American Cancer Society 1-800-227-2345** and ask if there are any clinics in your area that may be offering them free of charge. You can also contact **the Susan G. Komen helpline at 800-462-9273** or even call your local hospitals and clinics and ask about low cost testing.

All of these same organizations, as well as cancercare.org will have information about local support groups if you are interested. Equally important is one's feelings about how you look when faced with loss of hair, a common side effect of cancer treatment with chemotherapy. The program "Look good Feel better" offered through the American Cancer society (lookgoodfeelbetter.org) offers free beauty sessions to help lift your self-image.