

# Spreading the word about breast cancer

## Awareness necessary for women's health

*"The most highly prized curve of all is that of the bosom. The degree of attention which breasts receive, combined with the confusion about what the breast fetishists actually want, makes women unduly anxious about them. They can never be just right; they must always be too small, too big, the wrong shape, too lumpy. Her breasts are only to be admired for as long as they show no signs of their function: once darkened, stretched or withered they are objects of revulsion."* -Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch*.

By Dionne Stephens  
TORONTO (CUP)

ITS. HOOTERS. BONKERS. JUGS. TRUCKS. Melons. Handfuls. Breasts have always been viewed as a central symbol of womanhood. They are one of the most obvious physical distinctions between men and women, although hormone pills are increasingly making this an unreliable method of analysis.

Women have been fighting for years against male-defined breast expectations and its impact on our self-image. From the early stages of puberty, some girls remember the trauma of boys in class teasing them about the "golf balls" in their t-shirts -- or lack thereof. The media has a significant impact on the minds of men and women. Say the name of Marilyn Parton and what comes to mind? Similarly, a stripper's popularity seems to increase in accordance to the letter of her cup size.

But breasts also play a central part of the ceremony into womanhood -- the purchase of your first bras will never be forgotten once the white vest is no longer adequate to hold back the bulge.

As we get older, we realize our bodies shouldn't be constrained by male standards, so we let them hang. Sometimes we even use them to defy patriarchy-- like the infamous bare-chested Gwen Jacobs from the University of Waterloo-- as a visible symbol of our liberation.

As we grow older still, some women will lift, cut and paste their breasts in an attempt to regain their youthful appearance -- perhaps it's an attempt to preserve a fading symbol of power.

These attempts, regardless of motive, show just how important breasts are in our society. But what happens when they are taken away entirely?

"I felt at first that I was now really different from other women; like I wasn't the same anymore," said one cancer survivor, who asked not to be named. "Don't get me wrong, I was first and foremost happy to be alive, but this feeling was in the back of my mind."

Although breast cancer is attributed to several different genetic and environmental elements, there is no hard evidence of its cause and no solid cure.

Right now, once the disease has been diagnosed, the options are chemotherapy (medication that destroys cancer cells by interfering

with their growth or preventing their reproduction), mastectomy (surgical removal of a breast to contain a cancerous tumour) and lumpectomy (a partial mastectomy which rarely requires the removal of more than one-quarter of the breast).

Groups across Canada are actively promoting October as BreastCancer Awareness Month. However, when you consider the great

usually in the later stages and often it has already spread."

Also, for many people, breast cancer has an image of being an old woman's disease. Awareness campaigns are mainly geared to women over 50, for instance.

And while it's true that women are most at risk after 40, about 17 per cent of

However, younger women's breasts are more firm and dense, making the mammography results unclear and inaccurate.

There is also the issue of the doctor/patient relationship, especially when there is a male doctor involved. Because of the rise of reports in sexual harassment, women may be uncomfortable asking male doctors how a breast self-exam should be done.

"He would have to demonstrate on me -- it would be like he's feeling me up," one woman said.

Beyond this, there is the basic need for younger women to be more aware about their bodies. Since 80 per cent of all breast lumps are discovered by women and their partners, this is crucial. But can you describe what a normal breast looks like? Do you know what a normal breast should feel like? Are your own breasts normal?

Burlington Breast Cancer Support Services runs classes on self breast awareness. Geared for women over 14, the program stresses the importance of early breast cancer detection.

"We show you how to stand in front of a mirror since it is just as important to see yourself visually as well as touch," Pat Ogborne of the centre said.

"We like to do programs for young mothers and encourage mothers to bring their daughters."

Along these lines, the Ontario Breast Screening program is pushing for daughters, sons and husbands to encourage women to go for breast exams.

"We target Mother's Day," Amlani says. "We are good at nurturing everyone but ourselves, so sometimes we need to be reminded."

The Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation feels these types of programs need to be initiated earlier. In the secondary school system, women learn all about their reproductive capacities-- from menstruation to AIDS.

However, beyond stressing the importance of wearing a sports bra for gym class, breast health and breast cancer are virtually overlooked. For these high school women, the foundation is in the process of creating a breast self-examination instruction program.

The best time to do a breast self-exam is seven to 10 days after your period when there is the least amount of hormonal influence.


"The tissue is most normal then," Amlani said. "So that is the best time to become familiar with your own breast and its particulars."

Breast cancer survivor Rena Dublin-Antwi agrees with Amlani. Although she has lost a breast to cancer, she says a positive attitude has helped her deal with the disease.


"I don't hide it and if I feel like it, I just shove two shoulder pads in my brassiere," she says. "Women should be able to talk openly about it even if they never get the disease."

**MONTHLY BREAST SELF-EXAM**


**IN THE SHOWER.**  
Raise one arm. With fingers flat, touch every part of each breast, gently feeling for a lump or thickening. Use your right hand to examine your left breast, your left hand for your right breast.



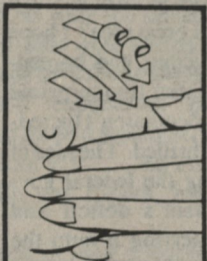
**LYING DOWN.**  
Place a towel or pillow under your right shoulder and your right hand behind your head. Examine your right breast with your left hand.



**BEFORE A MIRROR.**  
With arms at your sides, then raised above your head, look carefully for changes in the size, shape, and contour of each breast. Look for puckering, dimpling, or changes in skin texture.



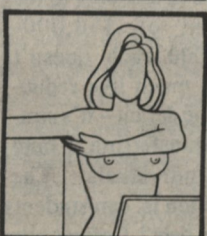
Fingers flat, press gently in small circles, starting at the outermost top edge of your breast and spiraling in toward the nipple. Examine every part of the breast. Repeat with left breast.



Gently squeeze both nipples and look for discharge.



With your arm resting on a firm surface, use the same circular motion to examine the underarm area. This is breast tissue, too.



Call your physician if you have any concerns.

importance and attention society places on women's breasts, it is surprising that many people are unaware about this campaign, or even the issue itself.

Breast cancer is the number three killer of women, with one in nine Canadian women expected to develop the disease in her lifetime.

According to the Canadian Cancer Society, one in 23 women will die because of the illness. Arlene Tubman, co-ordinator of the North York branch in Toronto, said Canada has one of the highest numbers of breast cancer cases in the world, surpassed only by the United States.

And recent studies indicate that black women have a greater chance of getting cancer in a more deadly form than white women.

Researchers have found that the cells appear to divide at a more rapid rate among black women. But some who work in this field see other external factors playing a major role.

"Because women of different ethno-cultural backgrounds tend to come from marginalized communities, many do not go to the doctor for various reasons -- economics, cultural beliefs," says Shebina Amlani, a Health Promotions Officer with the Ontario Breast Screening Program.

"When these women are diagnosed, it is

cases involve women under 35.

Twenty-four-year-old Sandra Dumas said she has regular breast examinations, mainly because breast cancer runs in her family.

Dumas's grandmother and aunt both died from breast cancer. Women who have a family history associated with the disease have an extremely high risk of getting breast cancer.

But even for those younger women who want to be tested, there are obstacles to face. Currently, digital mammography and a controversial bone marrow transplant are the newest -- and most expensive -- systems on the market for checking breast cancer.

The most common and cheapest form of checking is through a mammography. But not all patients are impressed with it.

Essentially, it is a way for doctors to see inside the breast by compressing the breast between two plates. Some women describe the process as feeling "like you're putting your breast in a trash compactor."

Doctors complain that mammography is not that accurate in young women. Breast tissue has an opaque appearance, so the looser it is, the easier it is to detect lumps.