

October is breast cancer awareness month  
by Mike DeCinti

It's that time once again to think pink. October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month, and although the topic of breast cancer is a serious one that deserves our attention the other 11 months of the year, during October more people will hopefully start talking about it.

I think it would be safe to guess that you at least know how serious breast cancer can be. And if you are reading this article and are a woman over the age of 40, I would hope you understand how serious this topic is for you. Why? Being a woman and getting older are the two biggest risk factors for developing breast cancer.

Approximately half of all women who develop breast cancer have no identifiable risk factor other than being female and aging. This means it is very important for every woman to be aware of this disease and to try to ensure that they find it early.

Other factors include having had breast cancer in the past. This puts a woman at higher risk for developing it again. Also, a family history of cancer increases your chances if you have had a first-degree relative (mother, sister, or daughter) who had breast or ovarian cancer.

According to research, breast cancer is clearly related to the sex hormones. In some types of breast cancers, the presence of the female sex hormone estrogen causes the cancer cells to grow and divide rapidly. During puberty, estrogen levels dramatically increase. During menopause, estrogen levels decrease. The longer the time the breasts are exposed to estrogen, the higher the risk of developing breast cancer. Therefore, breast cancer risk may be higher in women who started menstruating before age 12 or went through menopause after age 55. Risk may also be higher in women who have taken oral contraceptives or hormone replacement therapy. Since estrogen strengthens bones, women with high bone mass may have a higher risk of breast cancer.

Risk may also be higher in women who have taken certain types of hormone replacement therapy over several years or more. This type of therapy should not be confused with hormonal treatment, which is used to treat some breast cancers.

Not having children or having first child after age 30 may increase a woman's risk of developing breast cancer, because estrogen levels are lower during pregnancy. Not breast-feeding may also be a risk factor.

Being overweight may also increase breast cancer risk. In addition, research suggests that too much alcohol can increase the risk of breast cancer. Plus, it was just reported last week that women who drink one or more alcoholic beverages per day might be more likely to develop invasive breast cancer than women who do not drink alcohol. And although there is not a direct link between smoking and breast cancer, smoking can lead to various types of cancers, and women who smoke have poorer health in general.

As with many other cancers, being around certain environmental factors, such as

radiation, increases the risk of breast cancer. Thus, women who were exposed to high levels of radiation, such as those who had radiation to treat other cancers as a child, are at a higher risk of developing breast cancer.

So what should you do? The American Cancer Society (ACS) recommends that women age 40 years and older should have a screening mammogram every year. During mammography, your breast is placed between two plates and compressed as the x-ray is taken. You may feel discomfort as the plates press on the breast, but it will last only a few seconds. A doctor will read the mammogram and look for abnormalities. If the doctor detects any abnormality or change in the mammogram, you may have to undergo additional testing. A mammogram can detect many, but not all, cases of breast cancer.

To help spread the word about early detection, Lumberton Radiological Associates will honor National Mammography Day with an event to provide the county with information on protecting yourself against breast cancer.

The National Mammography Day event will be held on Friday, October 19<sup>th</sup> from noon until 2:00pm in the parking lot of Biggs Park Mall (near BB&T.) It is sponsored in part by The City of Lumberton, Robeson County, Biggs Park Mall, and WFNC 640AM.

Joining LRA will be the American Cancer Society, American Red Cross, The Sisters network (a cancer survivor group) and several more groups all working together to raise our awareness of this treatable and beatable form of cancer.