Dear Alice,

My mom found a lump in her breast, and she went to some alternative type doctor. I am really worried about her. The doctor she went to says that it is not cancer, but they didn't even biopsy the lump. I think they tested her blood or something. My parents are hippies, so they don't like standard medical practices. I guess my questions are: is it possible to test for breast cancer without a biopsy? And how can I find out whether or not this alternative medicine is reliable?

Thanks for taking the time to read my question,

Worried

Answer

Dear Worried,

Breast cancer, or the fear of breast cancer, can be so overwhelming that it becomes difficult to have rational discussions or take appropriate, sensible actions. In addition, with all of the available diagnostic procedures and therapies, it can be confusing and difficult to decide which type of medicine or treatment is best. And, helping people you love to be active and informed health care consumers can be equally frustrating. The important part is for your mother to get properly diagnosed. If the lump is, in fact, a tumor, a biopsy is the only way to confirm the diagnosis of cancer.

Many people with cancer turn to complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), therapies in conjunction with traditional medicine. Although some complementary treatments, such as supplementation, have been shown to have some effect, the mechanisms through which they work have not been completely understood. As a result, most medical professionals recommend that complementary and alternative medicine techniques should not replace conventional medicine techniques for diagnosing and treating cancer. Neither alternative medicine nor complementary medicine is subject to the strict testing/clinical trials used in approving conventional medicine. Organizations such as the American Cancer Society and Breastcancer.org acknowledge that complementary medicine can help improve the quality of life in cancer patients, but do not endorse its use for primary medical treatment or diagnosis.
Complementary and alternative techniques include acupuncture, herbal medicine, massage, support groups, and yoga. Some patients feel that these therapies help them relieve stress, maintain a positive attitude, and minimize the side effects of treatment. For more on the use of complementary and alternative therapies, check out the National Institute for Health (NIH) National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine [4].

It is highly recommended that your mother obtain a second opinion from a provider of conventional medicine. Although most lumps that women find in their breasts are not cancerous—they are usually fibro-cystic masses or cysts (fluid filled sacs)—all lumps found in or around the breast need further evaluation by a health care professional. Breast lumps can be properly evaluated through techniques such as diagnostic mammography, breast ultrasound, and biopsy. During a biopsy, a small sample of tissue from the lump is removed with a small needle or wire, and examined. If cancer is detected, or if the cells are questionable, further tests will be conducted to determine which procedures and treatments would work best.

Through this stressful time, consider speaking with your mom about her choices, and share with her the information you receive. That being said, it's also good to recognize that your mom has the final call in this decision. While you can share with her your concerns and the information you've found, the choice to pursue biomedical or alternative treatments, or no treatments at all, is hers. With cancer, particularly when you are not the patient, it is often most difficult to understand that you?despite your best efforts?cannot control the situation, nor its outcome; you can only control how you respond. Remember, it is okay to feel frustrated and confused during this tough time, but don't forget to share your unconditional love and support as well.

Alice!

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