Dear Alice,

Are there any differences in breast cancer between men and women?

Gender sensitive

(2) Dear Alice,

I feel that I might have male breast cancer. But I don't know how this is possible. I am young, younger than 18. And I would like to know how male breast cancer is contracted. Plus if I do, I'm afraid of telling my parents. What should I do?

Answer

Some folks may wonder if men have breasts, and the truth is that all men have breasts! There is breast tissue behind the nipples of a male's chest, and as your questions indicate, men can get breast cancer. While diagnoses and treatment (more on these later) for breast cancer is similar for males and females, there is a big difference in prevalence. Breast cancer occurs quite infrequently in men, accounting for only one percent of all male cancers, and less than one percent of all breast cancer cases. In 2015, it's estimated that about 2,350 new cases of breast cancer in biological males and 231,840 cases in biological females will be diagnosed in the United States. As for your concern specifically, Reader, it may be reassuring for you to know that although male breast cancer can happen at any age, it's extremely rare for boys under 18 (the average age of a male breast cancer patient is about 68 years old). That being said, kudos to you for paying attention to any changes you may have seen in your breasts. However, it's also good to know that while the presence of any atypical lumps, bumps, or changes in your breasts could be due to cancer, it may also be due to a different non-cancerous condition, or even just a stage of life.

What does male breast cancer look like? It usually presents in the form of a small lump (similar to female breast cancer cases). Other symptoms might include:

- Skin dimpling or puckering
- Nipple turning inward (retraction)
- Redness or scaling of the nipple or breast skin
- Discharge from the nipple
Treatment is identical for males and females, as is the prognosis (outlook). Males and females with the same stage of breast cancer have a fairly similar outlook for survival. Although men at any age can develop breast cancer, it's usually detected in men between the ages of 60 and 70. While the cause for male breast cancer is unknown, there are some factors that may increase a person's risk for it, including:

- Age (the older you are, the greater the risk)
- A family history of breast cancer
- Genetic mutations
- Estrogen treatments
- Klinefelter syndrome (when a male is born with an extra X chromosome)
- Exposure to radiation
- Heavy alcohol use, which can contribute to liver disease (another risk factor)
- History of testicle injury or infection, or undescended testicles
- Obesity
- Occupations with exposure to higher temperatures

There are also non-cancerous breast disorders that can occur in males such as gynecomastia, a button-like growth under the nipple and areola. This condition is caused by a hormonal imbalance that can occur during adolescence. Also, sometimes when males go through puberty, their breasts grow, becoming swollen and tender. This is considered normal and gradually goes away with time. In any case, if you're worried about the changes you've noticed in your body, there's no shame in telling someone you trust about what you've noticed.

Though it may be difficult, Reader, this might mean telling your parents what you've noticed. Perhaps you might start the conversation with something like: "Mom or Dad, can I talk with (your health care provider's name) about breast cancer in men? I know men can get it. I want to make sure that I don't have it because I'm a little worried that I do." You could also try to talk to someone else you're close with, such as another family member, a friend's parent, or a school nurse. S/he may be able to help you talk to your parents about your concerns. When you have concern like this one, it's recommended that you get it checked out by a health care provider so that you can either take action or relieve yourself of any unnecessary worry. Making sure your folks are aware of what you're experiencing can provide some much needed support and help you get any medical attention that may be needed.

If either of you are still interested in learning more about breast cancer in men, the American Cancer Society has even more information.

Alice!
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