GOOD DECISIONS - Educating Yourself on Breast Cancer

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October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month. Often during this month, you'll see specialized pink packaging on well-known brands or your favorite sports teams donning pink apparel, but breast cancer awareness is more than the color pink. Awareness is knowing risk factors, taking preventative measures and understanding facts about the second most common type of cancer in American women. As always, you should consult with a trusted physician to discuss any risks or concerns you have about breast cancer.

Breast Cancer Risk Factors

- **Family History** – Women with a family history of breast cancer in a first-degree relative (mother, sister, or daughter) have an increased risk of breast cancer. Women who have inherited changes in the BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes or in certain other genes have a higher risk of breast cancer.

- **Dense Breast Tissue** – Having breast tissue that is dense on a mammogram is a factor in breast cancer risk. The level of risk depends on how dense the breast tissue is. Women with very dense breasts have a higher risk of breast cancer than women with low breast density.
• **Alcohol Usage** – Drinking alcohol increases the risk of breast cancer. The level of risk rises as the amount of alcohol consumption rises.

**Preventative Measures**

• **Yearly Mammograms** – At the age of 40, women have the option to start getting yearly screening mammograms to detect any sign of disease that cannot be felt or seen. These yearly screenings are often responsible for early detection of breast cancer. Women with a family history of breast cancer may begin these annual screenings prior to age 40 with a physician’s recommendation.

• **Genetic Testing** – Most experts agree that mutation testing of individuals who do not have cancer should be performed only when the person’s individual or family history suggests the possible presence of a harmful mutation in BRCA1 or BRCA2 genes. However, this test cannot tell if a person will ever develop the types of cancers linked to these genes.

**Misinformation About Breast Cancer**

• **MYTH: Breast cancer affects women only.** Each year it is estimated that approximately 2,190 men will be diagnosed with breast cancer. While the percentage is still small, men should also check themselves periodically by performing a breast self-exam and reporting any changes to their physician.

• **MYTH: Finding a lump in your breast means you have breast cancer.** Only a small percentage of breast lumps turn out to be cancer. While changes in breast tissue should always be reported to your physician, the abnormality could be something like a cyst or scar tissue.