

H.T. 04/03/02

Busting Common Breast Cancer Myths

Cancerous growth can be detected almost at its very onset, says Col C. S. Pant, as he reiterates the importance of breast cancer screening, says SANCHITA SHARMA



Col. C. S. Pant advocates regular screening to detect tumours

PHOTO: MANOJ VERMA

EAST CANCER easily tops the list of the diseases most feared by women, but most of them do little more than talk about it. It's hardly surprising then that most women diagnosed with breast cancer are already in the second or third stage of the disease, when treatment becomes more aggressive and they end up losing more breast tissue.

"Fear of getting diagnosed and sheer neglect of their own health prevents women from getting themselves screened for breast cancer," says Dr (Col.) C. S. Pant, a well-known radiologist, whose *An Atlas of Breast Imaging* has just been published by Jaypee (1,500).

A mammography can detect microcalcification in the breast at its very onset, making it the detection method of choice. "Detection in stage zero (when the growth is contained to the duct) and stage one (when the growth is outside the duct but is less than 2 cm), treatment can almost insure a cure," says Col. Pant. "Treatment becomes difficult when the cancer has moved to stage 2 (when the tumour is 2 cm long, but hasn't affected lymph nodes), stage 3 (lymphatic nodes are positive, irrespective of tumour size) or stage 4 (cancer has spread to distant places), when survival rates plummet drastically."

Since breast cancer is hormone-driven, it puts women who've attained early menarche, those who don't conceive, have babies late in life or don't nurse their babies at greater risk. Progesterone protects against breast cancer, and

since more progesterone is produced during pregnancy and lactation, women who conceive and nurse their babies are more protected than those who don't," says Col. Pant. This perhaps explains why breast cancer has overtaken cervical cancer as the leading cancer among women in the metros of Delhi and Mumbai.

Self examination is a good way to detect changes in the breast, and Col Pant says the best time to do it is while bathing. "You should

use the flat of your fingers to examine the breasts at least once a month, but initially do it weekly for 10 successive weeks so that you understand the contours of your breast and notice any changes at once," he adds.

Don't let fear of cancer keep you away from mammograms either. "Only 5 per cent tumours are cancerous, and painful growths are a welcome sign as they are seldom malignant, so get a diagnosis done instead of living in fear," he adds. ■



KEEPING ABREAST OF CANCER DETECTION

If breast cancer is detected in the initial stages (stage zero and stage one), treatment can almost assure full cure. Here are some tips for timely cancer diagnosis:

- Learn to self examine your breast after the age of 20 years. Look for discharge, puckering, dimpling or scaling of the skin. Also, feel for any unusual lump under the skin.
- Family history doubles the risk of breast cancer. Those with a family history should get a mammography done every year after the age of 35 years, while those with no family history should do it every two years after 40 years.

● Since risk also increases with age, screen for growths once a year after the age of 50.

● Other risk factors include early onset of menarche (periods before the age of 11 years), conceiving after the age of 35, or not conceiving at all.

● Only 4 to 5 per cent tumours are malignant. Benign tumours are more common than malignant (cancerous) ones, so don't be afraid to get a mammography done.