

Reducing the Risk of Misdiagnosis and Delayed Diagnosis of Breast Cancer: Information and Tools for Young Women

Introduction

Over 180,000 women are diagnosed with breast cancer every year. Today, there are more than 250,000 women under forty living with breast cancer, and 11,000 more will be diagnosed in the next year. About 1,100 will die from the disease¹.

Young women with breast cancer often have a more aggressive form of cancer than older women. For this reason, early detection and treatment are extremely important to keep their cancer from growing and spreading. Unfortunately, some young women and their doctors are unaware that they are at risk for breast cancer, and may misdiagnose their breast lumps as fibrocystic disease, or take a “wait and see” approach while their breast lumps increase in size and become more difficult to treat.

The misdiagnosis and delayed diagnosis of breast cancer in young women is the most common type of medical malpractice case. The most common allegation in these claims is that doctors did not order tests to check for potential breast cancer, and this led to a delay in the diagnosis of cancer, which resulted in injury to the patient (the disease progressed to a later and more deadly stage). Typically, the severity of a breast lump is underestimated or mistaken for fibrocystic disease².

This booklet is intended to provide you with the tools you need to reduce your risk of a breast cancer misdiagnosis or delayed diagnosis, and was written by Tina Koral, who was diagnosed with breast cancer at age 30, after her doctors said she was too young for breast cancer. “Open communication with your doctor is the key,” Koral said recently, when asked about the most important thing a woman can do to reduce their risk of breast cancer malpractice. The information and tools in this booklet will help foster an effective dialogue with your doctor.

¹ Young Survival Coalition, www.youngsurvival.org. Accessed 1/1/09.

² Physicians Insurers Association of America Breast Cancer Study, 1999.

Causes of Misdiagnosis or Delayed Diagnosis of Breast Cancer

A misdiagnosis or delayed diagnosis of breast cancer can be caused by:

- Failure to order proper tests (fine-needle aspirations, mammograms, ultrasounds, MRIs, or biopsies)
- Failure to properly read or evaluate test results
- Failure to follow up on test results, such as referrals to a breast specialist
- Failure to order more tests if the results are inconclusive
- Failure to listen to patient's complaints
- Failure to adequately screen for increased risk (age, ethnicity, family or personal history, gender)
- Failure to identify obvious physical findings during examination, such as a breast lump or nipple discharge

Risk Reduction Strategies for Young Women

There are many steps you can take to avoid or reduce the risk of a misdiagnosis or delayed diagnosis if you suspect breast cancer.

See a doctor. Most of the time, doctor's diagnoses are correct and accurate. Don't self-diagnose any breast problem based on the Internet, books, or advice from friends or family. Never avoid seeing a doctor based on your own suspicions. Provide your doctor with as much information as possible about your symptoms and family history of breast cancer and gynecological cancers.

Parts excerpted from *If I Just Breathe*, by Tina Koral (ISBN #1440419922), available for \$14.95 on Amazon.com. For more information, visit: www.tinakoral.com

Copyright © 2009, by Tina Koral. The information in this booklet is intended for educational purposes only. Always consult your doctor with questions about your individual condition or circumstance.

Get a referral for a breast specialist. A breast specialist or surgeon is even less likely to misdiagnose a breast mass than your primary care doctor.

Get a second opinion. If you are not satisfied with the care you have received you're your doctor, or if your doctor does not take your complaints seriously, see another doctor. If the doctors agree, the chances of a misdiagnosis are greatly reduced. If they don't agree, be persistent until a correct diagnosis is reached.

Ask for a diagnosis. Ask your doctor to specifically name their diagnosis. Is it a fibrocystic condition? A benign tumor? Breast cancer? Make sure you and your doctor are both clear on what your diagnosis is. Do not let him/her ignore your complaints without giving you a reasonable response as to why you may be feeling the way that you do. If you're not satisfied with your diagnosis, ask for more tests, and question your doctor about what else your symptoms could mean.

Ask questions. If you do not understand the diagnosis, and the reasons the doctor has given you the diagnosis, it is difficult to assess its accuracy. Are any other diagnoses possible? What other diseases has your doctor tested for? Which ones have been ruled out?

Read test reports. Make sure your name is on the report and that the test given was appropriate for your specific condition. If you do not understand the results, ask the doctor to discuss them in further detail with you.

Research breast diseases. The best way to feel confident in your diagnosis is to understand the characteristics of the disease. Research your disease, how it is diagnosed, and what tests are typical.

Breast Health Conversation Starter

This worksheet is intended to assist women who suspect breast cancer in having a conversation with their doctor. It is not a substitute for a complete medical history or medical advice.

Complete the information below and review with your doctor.

Patient Name _____ **Date** _____

Symptom	Date first noticed	Indicate which breast		
<input type="checkbox"/> lump or thickening in breast or armpit	_____	Right	Left	Both
<input type="checkbox"/> breast pain	_____	Right	Left	Both
<input type="checkbox"/> nipple discharge	_____	Right	Left	Both
<input type="checkbox"/> breast skin discoloration	_____	Right	Left	Both
<input type="checkbox"/> skin dimpling or puckering	_____	Right	Left	Both
<input type="checkbox"/> scaling of nipple or breast skin	_____	Right	Left	Both
<input type="checkbox"/> sore on breast that won't heal	_____	Right	Left	Both
<input type="checkbox"/> noticeable veins	_____	Right	Left	Both

Family History of Cancer

List each family member with a history of cancer. Include their relationship to you and their age at diagnosis.

Other Questions or Concerns

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