

marie claire

90% is the survival rate if the cancer is detected in Stage I. It dips to 70 per cent in Stage II, 45 per cent in Stage III and 10 per cent in the last stage

80% is the probability of having breast cancer if a woman tests positive for the genes BRCA 1 & 2

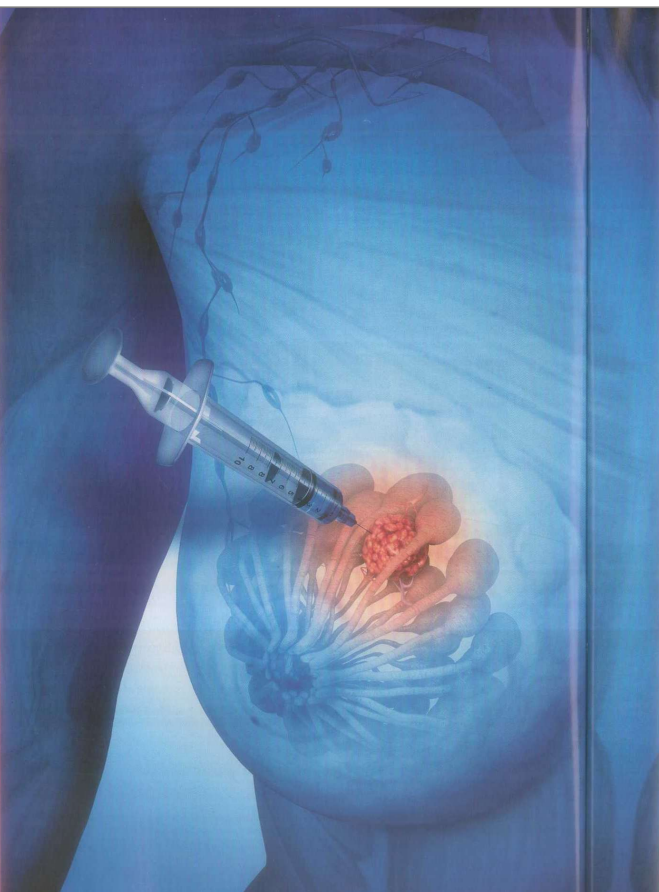
6.5 minutes. That is the frequency of occurrence of breast cancer instances in India

1.2 million people are diagnosed with this cancer every year and over 5,00,000 die of it

20% of Indian women do breast self-examination and go for clinical tests

1% of all breast-cancer patients in the world are men

All figures are taken from reliable sources and health professionals. Figures are approximate.



HEALTH

BREAST ASSURED?

They're a symbol of femininity, an object of love and lust, intrigue and interest, the first connection between a mother and child. And so when something as deadly as cancer strikes the breast, it can leave both physical and emotional scars. A report on the deadly disease and why information is the only way to battle it.

By Pallavi Shankar and Palak Malik

Sagna Puri, 36, homemaker; Ruchi Goyal, 38, entrepreneur; Seema Kapil, 39, jewellery designer. All leading healthy and happy lives, but with one common past. They were all struck by breast cancer in their 30s. Seema was diagnosed at the age of 31, Sapna at 34 and Ruchi at 36.

Doctors say that incidence of breast cancer among Indian women shows two peaks, once in the 30s and then in the 60s, unlike in the West where 60s are known to be the age that show a peak in the number of cases.

It's not a reason to panic, but definitely a wake-up call for women who take great care of how their breasts look, but rarely stop to ask how they're feeling. "Breast care and awareness of cancer should be spread urgently and aggressively in the country. Although we need more conclusive studies to prove this, Indian women seem to be genetically predisposed to developing breast cancer. There are lifestyle and environmental factors that also have a role to play," says Dr Chintamani, senior surgical oncologist and professor of surgery at Delhi's Safdarjung Hospital.

The World Health Organisation predicts that by 2020, India will be on par with the US and Europe in the prevalence of breast cancer, that is one in seven

women will suffer from the disease. "Current statistics in India show that one out of 50 women are affected by breast cancer in the age-group of 30-70," says Dr Amit Bhargava, consultant oncologist, Max Healthcare, Delhi.

Why is this happening? Doctors recount various causes, but one peculiar to breast cancer is that a woman's chances of developing the cancer increase if the breasts have not been utilised to perform their primary function - breast-feeding. Dr Umberto Veronesi of Italy, considered the father of modern breast-cancer surgery and the founder of breast-conserving surgery, while addressing the Indian Breast Cancer Initiative 2008 earlier this year, commented that the increasingly "Western" lifestyle among Indian women was a major factor for the growth in the number of cases. By this he meant that more Indian women were now opting for late marriage and even later pregnancies (post 30s), one of the known causes for breast cancer. According to him, "childbirth and breast-feeding keeps the hormones flowing and breasts remain healthy, the absence of which is related to a lot of women in the 30s and 40s getting breast cancer."

Bhargava agrees. "Going against the law of nature is detrimental to the well-being of women," he says. Being a hormone-dependant cancer, breast-

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ALL about YOU

Ruchi Goyal, a Delhi-based entrepreneur, is a Stage IV breast-cancer survivor



SURVIVOR SPEAK

RUCHI GOYAL, 38

When people hear my story, they are surprised how I can be so happy. Do I have to look morose, I ask! I have beaten cancer. And so I'm living life to the hilt. Yes, I dress well and wear make-up. Why ever not?

Life has been a roller-coaster ride for me though. Two years back, I noticed a retraction in my right nipple and went for a mammogram. The radiologist assured me that there was 'nothing serious'. Three months later, after experiencing some discomfort, I visited the radiologist again and this time 'something' was found. Four oncologists down, I was diagnosed with Stage IV cancer in my right breast at a reputed Delhi hospital. It had metastasized from my breast to both my lungs and bones, from skull to joints. Just enjoy whatever life you have got, I was told by most doctors, except Dr Amit Bhargava who eventually treated me. My first reaction was: Why is this happening to me? I had just got out of a failed marriage and was busy bringing up my two little children. I wanted to die but thankfully I found some solace in meditation and felt somewhat positive. Suddenly I wanted to survive, for my children, for myself.

I went for hormone therapy through surgery, in which my ovaries were removed to stop the production of oestrogen and progesterone in order to treat cancer. The successful surgery was followed by eight chemotherapy sessions. It took me one year to get rid of the cancer. But I was never down and out. I had lost my hair, and suffered extreme weakness. But three days after each chemotherapy session, I would wear a wig, colour my eyebrows and go out for a nice meal. I have gained 15 kilos post-hormone therapy but I'll address this problem as well. I eat healthy and do yoga regularly. No more *aloo paneer*. My diet consists of bright coloured veggies, wheatgrass juice, amla and curd.

Breast cancer runs in my family but I know it's not going to relapse. I am now the vice-president of Maisonette, a chain of jewellery stores. There is so much to do and achieve. I'm not a cynic, never will be.

/// Awareness has increased. The average SIZE OF THE TUMOUR WHEN DETECTED IS SMALLER THAN what it was a decade ago ///

► feeding your child for one year reduces the oestrogen level in the body, thus reducing the risk factor, he further adds.

But marriages or pregnancies are not planned around risk factors of cancers. Neither will this knowledge change the way women are choosing to lead their lives today. So what then is the way out of this situation?

It is early detection. "Timely detection of breast cancer helps in halting the progression of cancer cells at an early stage but less than 20 per cent patients see a doctor in Stage I," says Dr Chintamani. Early detection also enhances the chances of conserving the breasts. Awareness has increased, at least among younger women, who are turning up

for mammography if they detect anything suspicious during breast self-examination. "The average size of the tumour when detected is also smaller than what it was a decade ago," says Dr Harit K Chaturvedi, senior oncologist, Rajiv Gandhi Cancer Institute and Research Centre, Delhi.

It was during a routine self-examination that Seema noticed a lump in her breast. Even her doctor dismissed it as a harmless growth, until a mammography proved them wrong. The cancer was in Stage I, but it spread rapidly and the cancerous tumour had to be surgically removed. Radiation followed, and for the next six years, she took Tamoxifen, an oral drug that interferes with the activity of the oestrogen - the ►

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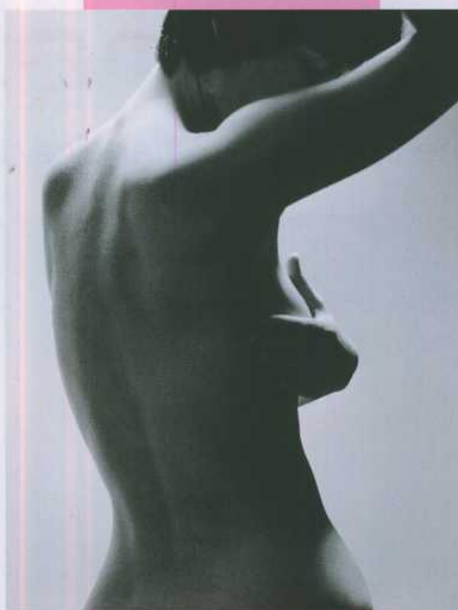
► hormone largely responsible for the development of breast cancer. Seema is now cured of the deadly disease but does regular check-ups to ensure there is no relapse. Sadly, the rate of relapse is almost 50 per cent.

Breast cancer is also being linked to lifestyles. In India, it is more common in metros and cities than rural settings. A family history of the cancer increases your chances of developing the disease, and may necessitate an annual mammography. Studies of the genes BRCA-I and II (for breast cancer) suggest that mutation in either of these is linked to the development of this cancer. The other risk factors include early puberty (before 12), late menopause (post 55), late motherhood (post 30), nulliparity (never bearing children) and carcinogenic agents like nicotine contaminated air in the environment. "There are other biological phases in a woman's life when she may need to undergo a mammography. For instance, if she has experienced poor lactation," says Bhargava. Like it happened in Sapna's case. A mother of two, she developed breast cancer after the birth of her second child. "The 2.5 cm cancerous cyst had to be removed surgically and I took six chemotherapy sessions and 31 radiation sessions in a span of only one year. It was indeed a very difficult phase, the medicines reacted and at times I turned blue, sometimes red and even yellow. The reactions were drastic with a lot of water retention and swelling. I used to look my mother's age," she says, relieved at having successfully beaten the disease.

The age of the patient and size of the tumour are important considerations for deciding the line of treatment. But surgery is no substitute to chemotherapy or radiations, and the treatment is usually a combination of the three. There are four stages in cancer, the fourth being the most deadly, though advances in science have increased the survival rate.

The treatment too may set you back by a couple of lacs, a cause of worry especially if you're older. "And in India, there is no medical insurance for cancer patients for those over 60," laments Hardeep Kaur, 61, who is battling Stage IV breast cancer. "Chemotherapy may cost about Rs 70-75,000 per session, radiation Rs 65,000," says Kaur.

But what perhaps leaves a bigger scar is



BREAST SELF-EXAMINATION

IN THE SHOWER

Raise your right arm. Use the finger pads of your left hand to touch every part of your right breast. Feel gently for any lumps or changes under the skin. Then switch arms and repeat the exercise on the other breast.

BEFORE A MIRROR

Place your arms at your sides. Check both breasts for anything unusual - discharge, puckering, dimpling or changes in skin texture. Clasp your hands behind your head and look carefully for any changes in skin texture. Keeping your hands clasped behind your head, look carefully for any changes in the contour of your breasts. Gently squeeze both nipples and look for any discharge.

LYING DOWN

Lie flat on your back, with your left arm over your head and a pillow under your left shoulder. Put your left hand behind your head. Use your right hand to begin touching your left breast gently but firmly.

These self-exams are a good way to notice any possible lumps but are not a substitute for mammography, which is a special X-ray examination of the breast.

the emotional setback, the fear of losing one's breasts and the misery of losing hair and eyebrows as a side-effect of chemotherapy. It's a fact that necessitates the coupling of its treatment with psychotherapy. Several NGOs, support groups and a few doctors are now working for the cause and providing psychological help to women. "We counsel the patients and offer reconstruction surgery that involves breasts implants for those seeking permanent breast mounds following surgical removal," says Dr Chaturvedi.

One such organisation is the Aastha Breast Cancer Support Group in Pune, which has been offering psychotherapy to patients through interactive platforms with other cancer survivors. They use music therapy for stress-relief and stage motivational plays. "We also spread awareness about early detection and self-examination through television, radio and road shows," says Aparna Ambike,

secretary of Aastha. The group, along with Pune-based Dr Shekhar Kulkarni, have jointly started a lymphoedema clinic, that addresses the complications of mastectomy.

The quality of diagnosis has also taken a leap. "The cancer tumour begins 15 years before it is diagnosed and we now have technology to help detect it much earlier," says Dr P.K Menon, medical director of Quest Diagnostics, a US-based diagnostic firm that recently opened a branch in Delhi. Dr Chintamani is actively involved in a cancer-research project that studies how dermatoglyphic traits (surface features of skin, including wrinkles and folds) can help identify women with a high risk of breast cancer. "The fingerprints, like the genetic code, are unique. And they may lead us into finding women with a strong family history of breast cancer who can be kept under close follow-up for early detection of the disease," he says.

What will also help a great deal is a larger awareness of this disease among general practitioners and non-specialists who are often the first people to be consulted. Many women may lose out on precious time by the time the cancer is detected.

It is a cause endorsed by many celebrities and big brands. Models have walked the ramp to raise funds for treatment and research, cosmetic giants have launched breast-care foundations. But the biggest service you can do is to take it in your own hands! ■

PHOTOGRAPHS: GETTY IMAGES