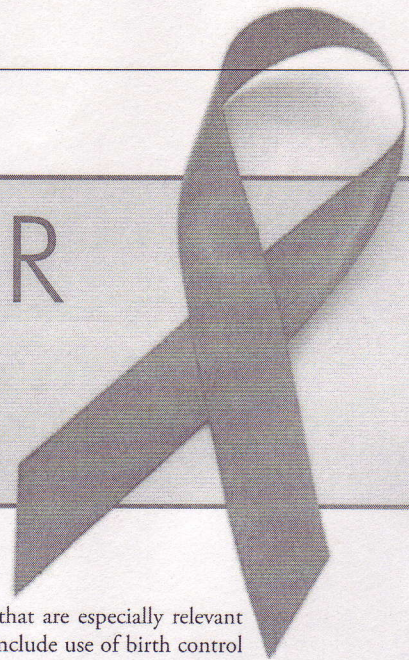


By Julie Jacobs

BREAST CANCER

A LOOK AT ITS IMPACT ON YOUNGER WOMEN



The face of breast cancer is changing and no longer restricted to wrinkles, age spots or even fine lines. One in 20 women with breast cancer is diagnosed before age 40, according to the journal *Cancer Statistics*, and the American Cancer Society estimates that of the hundreds of thousands of new cases occurring each year, roughly 6.5 percent involve women under 40. While breast cancer in this population is not as common as it is in the 40-plus set, the facts remain that the disease is the leading cause of cancer-related deaths in younger women and it affects them differently than their older counterparts, both physically and psychologically.

To start, delays in diagnosis are frequent, due to a mindset that women under 40 are too young to have the disease, which in turn leads to warning signs being ignored. Diagnosis in general is more difficult in younger women, because their breast tissue tends to be denser. Often, the cancer is in an advanced stage by the time a lump can actually be felt.

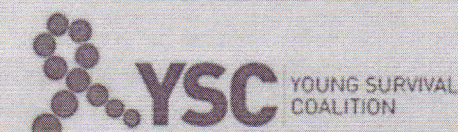
Breast cancer is typically more aggressive in those under 40, with larger and higher-grade tumors that are less responsive to therapy. Additionally, its recurrence rate is higher and its

survival rate is lower. Risk factors that are especially relevant to the younger female population include use of birth control pills, exposure to radiation, smoking, a history of miscarriage or induced abortion, and treatment for Hodgkin's disease.

Younger women also usually contend with concerns that can have a long-term impact on their quality of life. They may be more prone to having issues with body image, particularly after surgery, along with intimacy problems as they date and pursue relationships. For those wanting to start a family, infertility can result from therapeutic interventions. Younger women, many of whom may be single, can face financial hardships as well, if their income and health insurance are jeopardized due to extended time away from work to receive treatment.

Despite what is already known, research into why it is so has been stunted to some degree. Limited studies to date have continued to explore the link between oral contraceptives and breast cancer. They also have shown that the biological aspects diverge between younger and older women when it comes to immune function, tumor origin and development, and gene expression (when a gene "turns on" to produce an enzyme or other chemical in the body). Investigators theorize that breast cancer in women under 40 is more likely to be estrogen receptor-negative, meaning it is not driven by the hormone estrogen, and that it may indicate a mutation of the BRCA gene, normally a tumor suppressor. Research further suggests the more common incidence of HER2 (human epidermal growth factor receptor-2) positive breast cancer in younger women; this growth factor promotes cancer-cell growth and its associated form of the disease is deemed more aggressive than other types of breast cancer.

What is universal for all women is the benefit of prevention strategies to reduce the risk of developing breast cancer. These include maintaining a healthy weight, exercising regularly, curbing alcohol intake, and avoiding exposure to pollutants in the environment. Breast-feeding may offer protection as well. ▲



The Young Survival Coalition (YSC) is a nonprofit advocacy group dedicated to the specific needs and concerns of young women with breast cancer. YSC works to increase the amount of research done on breast cancer in younger women, and to provide age-appropriate resources and support for these women during and after treatment. The organization lobbies researchers and legislators and collaborates with other cancer-fighting groups, including the American Cancer Society. For more information, visit www.youngsurvival.org.

For more information: breastcancer.org; mayoclinic.com; ncbinim.nih.gov/pubmed/; webMD.com; www.youngsurvival.org.