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Heart to Heart

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Update on Breast Cancer

(Part One of Two)

Last Wednesday, following John Kerry's concession to Republican George W. Bush in the US national elections, Elizabeth, 55, the wife of the Democratic vice presidential candidate John Edwards, underwent a needle biopsy of a lump in her right breast, which was detected a week before. The results confirmed the diagnosis of invasive ductal cancer. This news once again brings to the forefront this dreaded malignancy and highlights the importance of regular self-examination and medical check-up.

In the United States alone, about 216,000 women will come down with cancer of the breast. About 65%-80% of all breast cancer are invasive ductal carcinoma, which can spread from the milk ducts to throughout the breast and other parts of the body. Statistically, one in seven women will develop one form of cancer of the breast in their lifetime.

What is a breast lump?

A breast lump is palpable nodule or mass in the breast, most commonly among females. The woman herself, on self-examination, or someone else examining her, could feel the lump or bump in her breast. Sometimes, the lump or lumps are discovered accidentally. Not all lumps in the breast are cancerous, but once a lump is found, tests must be done to rule out the possibility of cancer, especially among those age 40 and older.

What causes breast cancer?

No one single cause or factor has been decisively implicated as the etiology of breast cancer. However, the following are some factors or conditions that have been

associated with increased risk of developing cancer of the breast: smoking, radiation exposure before the age of 30, early menarche (first menstrual period), late first pregnancy, late menopause, obesity in menopausal women, high fat diet and alcohol. Prolonged (more than 4 years) use of oral contraceptive before the first pregnancy, and estrogen replacement therapy longer than 10 to 20 years “may increase the risk,” according to medical literature.

How about lumps during the menstrual period?

Some women develop lumps during their menstrual cycle, and these are usually benign (not cancer), but any lump in the breast should not be ignored. Any woman discovering any lump in her breast or anywhere in her body should consult with her physician for follow-up monitoring.

Why is breast examination important?

Discovering a lump in the breast or anywhere in the body is an important warning that the person should see a physician without delay, to make sure the lump is not cancer. Early diagnosis could spell the difference between life and death in cases of cancer of any organ in the body.

What should one look for when examining breasts?

Lumps or bumps, hardened or thickened areas, changes in shape or contour, change in symmetry, discharges or rashes in the nipple. In order to have a baseline guide, women must examine their breasts at least once a week, to see their normal symmetry, their shape and contour, and to be familiar with how they feel, as normal breasts. Should any change occur at a later date, then they would be able to discern the change from normal, and this should direct them to see their physician right away. Self-exam is NOT a substitute for regular medical examination.

What is the right technique to examine the breast?

Self-examination is an added way to fight cancer of the breast. Unless she has the luxury and convenience of having someone else perform the examination on her once a week, the woman should examine her breasts herself. Some women check their breasts daily, when they shower or change clothes. The woman could be sitting or standing in front of a mirror, starting with a visual inspection for changes in shape or contour and symmetry, nipple rashes or discharges. Then, press the hand over the breast (like gentle massaging motion) from the top, the sides, the bottom (all four quadrants) of the breast, going towards the nipple each time, feeling for any nodule or lump. The entire breast, both breasts, should be examined, at least twice per examination in an unhurried, relaxed fashion. Certainly, the husband or a

friend could be the examiner, so long as they are instructed on how to do it properly by a physician or a trained personnel.

Is there a diagnostic machine for breast lumps?

Yes, it is popularly know as a mammogram. This is a very important test, but physical examination of the breast by trained hands is equally as important and the two complement each other in increasing the chances of making the correct diagnosis. A negative or normal mammogram, for instance, in the presence of a definite breast mass, does not eliminate cancer. And conversely, if the physical examination does not detect a lump but the mammogram suggests the presence of a lump, one must believe the mammogram.

Next Monday: More intriguing information on cancer of the breast.