

AS THE DOCTOR ADVISED, Carolyn went for her annual mammogram. She'd had benign cysts several times, and wasn't too worried. Until her doctor told her there were "irregularities," and scheduled a sonogram then a biopsy. Two days after the biopsy, someone from the office called. It was cancer.

"I asked them to repeat that, then I hung up. Oh, my God, I've got cancer. What am I going to do?" Carolyn was 54 years old and hadn't been ill. On January 4, 2005, she became one of the estimated 170,000 women diagnosed with breast cancer annually. After two years, a lumpectomy, radiation, and chemotherapy, Carolyn is doing well.

In 2006, four women under the age of 30 were all diagnosed with breast cancer. They became friends and published the book *Nordie's at Noon* in the hope of educating, inspiring, and encouraging other young women facing this disease. The American Cancer Society estimates that one out of every seven women will be affected by breast cancer in their lifetimes. While the mean age for women diagnosed with breast cancer is generally 60, it does not limit itself to age – or gender.

Four physicians failed to recognize that an inverted nipple might mean cancer for Fred. It took two years and a severe burning sensation there to get the attention of his doctor, who found a lump. The biopsy revealed it was cancer and he had an immediate mastectomy.

"We were shocked," says Fred's wife. The oncologist checked for and found that Fred had the inherited cancer gene, BRCA2. "Ten women on his father's side had breast cancer."

Breast cancer in males and females is similar, but important distinctions like breast size and awareness affect early diagnosis and survival, especially in cases of male breast cancer. Experts predict that 2,030 men between the ages of 60 and 70 will develop breast cancer in the United States this year. Approximately 450 of those will die. Only five to ten percent of breast cancers are inherited by either males or females. Most genetic mutations related to breast cancer aren't inherited, but develop during your lifetime.

Adopting healthy lifestyle strategies such as limiting alcohol, maintaining a healthy weight, avoiding long-term hormone therapy, staying physically active, eating high-fiber foods, olive oil use, and avoidance of pesticide exposure are important preventative measures. Improvements in early diagnosis and treatments have also reduced the need for radical mastectomies and show a much higher survival rate.

Being aware of the signs and symptoms may help save your life. The earlier breast cancer

is discovered, the greater the treatment options and chance of recovery. A common sign of breast cancer in men and women is a lump or thickening of the breast, but most breast lumps are not cancerous.

Other signs to look for:

- Puckering or dimpling of breast skin
- A new retraction or indentation of the nipple
- Scaling or redness of the nipple or breast skin
- Clear or bloody discharge from the nipple

Women are taught to begin breast self-examination at age 20, and have a clinical breast exam once every year until age 40 when they begin regular screening mammograms. Because male breast cancer is so rare, regular screening mammograms are generally not recommended. However, regardless of your age or gender, if you have a strong family history of cancer, communicate with your doctor and discuss developing a breast-screening program. ●

~B.D. THARP

Aware & Alive