

Take Charge of Your Breast Health

By Dr Felicia Tan



The female breast is an asset but also a source of anxiety. Breast cancer remains the commonest cancer amongst women, and the commonest cause of cancer death in women. Every year, 1,200 women in Singapore learn they have breast cancer, and this is on the rise. 90% of them will have no apparent risk factors or hereditary risk. Early detection, careful diagnostic evaluation and therapy are important tools to reduce breast cancer mortality.

Monthly regular breast self examinations will help you know if you have any irregularity or lump that was not there previously. In addition, you should have your breasts examined by a doctor periodically. I recommend an annual clinical examination (together with a mammogram) if you are 40 years and above, and a 3-yearly examination if you are between 20 to 40 years of age.

Mammogram is the best way to detect early stage breast cancer, even before it can be felt. We are seeing close to 100% cure rates for appropriately treated pre-invasive breast cancers. However, mammograms are not perfect. Hence, young women or women with dense breasts may need other forms of imaging such as ultrasound or MRI.

If an abnormal area is detected on imaging, a biopsy will be performed to remove some cells for examination under the microscope. The time from detection to diagnosis is often an intense period of anxiety for patients and at Raffles Hospital, we are able to make this short.

With advances in technology, most breast lumps can be removed with minimally invasive methods, such as the vacuum assisted breast biopsy.

A small nick is made on the patient's skin and a needle is inserted under image guidance. Unlike core needle biopsy, which involves separate needle insertions to remove multiple samples, the new probe is inserted only once to remove multiple samples. Small breast lumps can be completely removed using this. This procedure can be done in the clinic under local anaesthesia without the need for hospital stay.

Breast cancer no longer equates to losing one's entire breast. Surgical treatment for breast cancer is tailored to obtain the best results - both survival and cosmetic outcomes. While surgery remains the only cure, the majority of breast cancers can now be treated with breast-conserving surgery. This removes the cancerous tumour without causing significant deformity to the breast.

Even in instances where the entire breast needs to be removed for cure or per patient's preference, there are surgical techniques that allow the breast to be reconstructed with excellent aesthetic outcome. One technique, known as skin-

sparing or nipple-sparing mastectomy, involves removal of the entire breast with preservation of the skin and/or nipple. This allows immediate breast reconstruction with tissues taken from another part of the patient or with breast implants. This technique has been proven to be as safe as traditional mastectomy but with superior cosmetic outcomes. Depending on the stage of your disease, your breast specialist will discuss with you the need for other treatment modalities such as radiotherapy, chemotherapy, hormonal therapy or targeted therapy.

At Raffles Hospital, our breast specialist would be able to perform a personal risk assessment, advise on the need for further tests and frequency of screening mammograms or other imaging modalities. She will also give you advice on risk-lowering strategies and answer any questions you might have on breast related conditions. With early detection, appropriate treatment and surveillance, women today have a better chance than ever to survive breast cancer. RH



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Her clinical interest lies in breast oncology and the use of surgical techniques to achieve the best oncologic and cosmetic outcome for her patient. This includes breast conservation surgery for cancers as well as nipple and skin sparing mastectomies with immediate breast reconstruction. She is also adept with the whole range of breast surgical procedures. Dr Tan is the pioneer of the procedure radioisotope occult lesion localisation in Singapore, - used for locating non-palpable breast lesions and microcalcifications for surgical excision.