

# Breast Cancer Before 40

Doctors May Ignore Symptoms of the Disease in Younger Women, Make Sure You Don't!

**W**hen Tracy Pleva Hill discovered a lump while massaging her breast ducts, which were plugged from breastfeeding, her doctor told her not to worry. "He said I was too young for breast cancer," recalls the 32-year-old mother, "and I wanted to believe he was right."

But he wasn't. Pleva Hill was diagnosed with breast cancer, and six months later underwent a mastectomy and chemotherapy.

Asha Mevlana, age 25, discovered a lump during a breast self-exam when she was 24. A mammogram revealed nothing. Her doctor told her she was far too young to have breast cancer, and that even though there was a history of the cancer in her family, it was on her father's side, which wasn't considered a risk factor. This misconception cost Mevlana a year, at which time a biopsy revealed cancer.

When 35-year-old Joy West tried to get a mammogram after she noticed a scab on her nipple, she was put on a waiting list for six months because

she was considered at minimum risk for breast cancer. She was later diagnosed with Paget's Disease of the nipple (a slow-growing cancer that accounts for 1 percent of all breast cancers).

These three tales share a common starting point: denial that the disease can strike younger women.

## Low Rates, Diagnostic Challenges

Although the majority of women with breast cancer are over age 40 (see "Breast Cancer Rates by Age"), one in every 258 women ages 20 to 39 will be diagnosed with breast cancer this year, according to the New York-based Young Survival Coalition. Approximately 1,500 will die from the disease.

The public should not be alarmed, however, about an epidemic of breast cancer among younger women. The American Cancer Society (ACS) reports that early-stage breast cancer rates rose 40 percent between 1973 and 1998, but Deborah Axelrod, M.D., co-author of *Basom Buddies: Lessons and Laughter on Breast Health and*

*Cancer* (Warner Books, 1999), says more recent rates have actually decreased by approximately 1 percent annually – the result of more public awareness and better detection practices.

"The female population as a whole needs to be alerted, but not overly alarmed," says LaMar McGinnis, M.D., a senior medical consultant for the American Cancer Society. "The risk of dying of heart disease is sevenfold greater than [the risk of] dying from breast cancer," he points out.

But McGinnis also says that many doctors discount breast cancer symptoms in younger patients because lumps and discomfort are similar to the fibrocystic conditions present in 70 percent of menstruating women. Pregnancy, lactation and breast density in young women also make breasts more difficult to assess, and mammograms less effective.

Unfortunately, the symptoms associated with the disease – a mass, breast pain, drainage from the nipple, erosion or dimpling of the skin and palpable lumps in the armpits – usually indicate late breast cancer, says McGinnis.

Patients with these symptoms who are dismissed by their primary-care physician must assume responsibility for their health and seek a second opinion or a referral to a breast cancer center or specialist, says McGinnis.



Asha Mevlana, shown before and after chemotherapy, was diagnosed with breast cancer at age 25.

"Doctors think you're not going to get it, so they play the odds," Pleva Hill adds. "But you don't want it to be your life they're gambling with."

## Risk Factors

Although many women believe family history is the main risk factor for breast cancer, Axelrod points out that 90 percent of breast cancer patients have no family history of the disease, and 80 percent have no identifiable risk.

Even so, young women should know their family history, McGinnis advises. If there's a link, he says, get a mammogram when you are 10 years younger than the age at which your relative developed breast cancer. For example, if your mother developed breast cancer at age 45, begin having mammograms at age 35.

Other risk factors include:

- age
- a long menstrual history
- obesity after menopause
- recent use of oral contraceptives or postmenopausal estrogens
- having no children or giving birth to a first child after age 30
- excessive alcohol consumption.

The BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes also play a role in 7 percent of breast cancers. These mutations discovered in the early 1990s appear in less than 1 percent of the general population, but indicate a predetermination for breast and ovarian cancer. For a 30-year-old woman with the mutation, the risk for developing breast cancer can be as high as one in three, says Axelrod. *Continued on Page 22*

## Breast Self-Exam

**T**he best time to do a breast self-exam is two to three days after your period; women who don't menstruate should pick the same day each month. Look for changes in appearance or texture, such as a lump or knot, drainage from the nipple, erosion or dimpling of the skin, or palpable lumps in the armpits. Use whichever of the following two methods is most comfortable for you:

- **Lying down** – Place a pillow under your right shoulder. Put your right hand under your head. Check the entire right breast with the finger pads of your left

hand. Using light, medium and firm pressure, make small circular motions and follow an up-and-down pattern. Repeat on your left breast.

- **In the shower** – Raise your right arm. With soapy hands and flat fingers, follow the steps outlined in the "lying down" method.

Before or after either method, examine your breasts four ways: with arms at your side, arms overhead, hands on hips (press firmly to flex the chest muscles), and bending forward.

Source: Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation



# For Women

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## Survivor Skills

A diagnosis of breast cancer is not a death sentence. When the disease is detected early, the five-year survival rate for women with breast cancer confined to the breast is 85 percent.

Even with advanced treatment options, however, women with breast cancer face physical and emotional upheaval, and younger women often have concerns or needs that are not the same as those of older patients. Some women, for example, are afraid they won't see their children grow up. For others, the dream of a family or another child is threatened or postponed by chemotherapy drugs that bring about early or temporary menopause.

West, a single mother, had questions about how her life would change. She attended a support group for help, but most of the women were twice her age. "They thought I was someone's daughter," she says. "No one had a 5-year-old son to explain things to. I had questions about how to tell my son, how to juggle work and chemo, and dating issues," says West, who started her own support group for young women with breast cancer.

The cosmetic effects of breast cancer can also take a toll on a woman's self-esteem, whatever her age. In addition

to possibly losing a body part, many patients lose their hair, eyelashes and eyebrows. West took a proactive approach and went wig-shopping. And instead of losing her long, auburn hair, she shaved her head and sent the hair to Locks of Love, a nonprofit group ([www.locksoflove.org](http://www.locksoflove.org)) that provides hairpieces to children with medical-related hair loss. "It wasn't a hair loss that way — it was a hair donation," she says.

## Early Detection

No woman is completely safe from breast cancer, but you can take steps to protect yourself by catching the disease early.

## Breast Cancer Rates by Age

Per 1,000 women:	
20 to 24	— .07
25 to 29	— 4.3
30 to 34	— 12.9
35 to 39	— 29.5
40 to 44	— 60
45 to 49	— 101
80 to 84	— 306

Source: American Cancer Society

The ACS says mammography is the most effective method of early detection, and can find about 90 percent of cancers before physical symptoms develop. The organization also recommends that women ages 20 to 39 have a clinical breast examination every two years (ages 40 and older, every year), perform monthly breast self-exams (see sidebar for information on how to examine your breasts), and get annual mammograms starting at age 40.

Pleva Hill touts another approach: "Get to know your breasts. Get to know them well," she says. "You're not going to prevent breast cancer, but you can increase your chances of survival."

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