

NOT JUST A 'WOMAN'S DISEASE'

MISCONCEPTIONS PAVE WAY FOR STAGE 3 OR 4 BREAST CANCER DIAGNOSIS IN MEN

BY KATHLEEN O'BRIEN

'woman's disease,' said Priya Jadeja, MD, breast surgeon, Summit Medical Group.

When it comes to treatment options, however, she finds their reactions to be as varied as her women patients.

"Some men feel less connected to their breast and are less emotional about the process," she said. "Other men are very connected to this part of their body and are highly motivated to preserve their breast

Men with breast cancer are typically diagnosed at a later stage than women, usually because they don't believe they can get the disease in the first place.

Photo courtesy of Getty Images



Futterweit was lucky in one respect: Because nipple discharge from a blocked milk duct caused him to seek prompt medical attention, his tumor was caught at Stage 1. Eight years later, he noticed a little dimple on the same breast where he'd had his surgery. A needle biopsy revealed it to be cancerous, so he underwent the treatment protocol he'd dodged the first time around: 12 weeks of chemotherapy followed



Marc Futterweit, third from left and a two-time breast cancer survivor, stands with other breast cancer survivors who are a part of the Male Breast Cancer Coalition.

Photo courtesy of Kathi Wolder

It never occurred to Wayne resident Marc Futterweit that the odd bump he noticed in the shower could be breast cancer.

Clearly something was amiss though: When he squeezed the area, there was discharge from the nipple. He was prescribed an antibiotic for a staph infection, but when that didn't do the trick, his doctor suggested a mammogram.

Futterweit's reaction: "What do you mean, a mammogram? We don't have breasts!"

His doctor's quick response: "What do you think you have there?"

"Pecs," Futterweit said. "I thought they were pecs."



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Genetic testing is encouraged in male breast cancer patients because men are more likely than women to have a gene mutation that predisposes them to breast cancer.

Men do, in fact, have a tiny amount of breast tissue behind their nipples, formed in the earliest weeks of fetal development. That means they, too, can get breast cancer.

Yet, so few men know this, which often means that their cancers are typically diagnosed at a later stage than women's. While 16 percent of women's breast cancer cases are diagnosed at Stage 3 or 4, the comparable figure for men is 25 percent. That alone gives them a higher mortality rate.

Roughly 2,670 men are diagnosed with breast cancer every year, and about 500 die from it, according to the American Cancer Society's 2019 estimates.

In addition to the shock of a cancer diagnosis, men also have to confront their own incredulity that their disease is even biologically possible.

"Often with men the reaction is initial denial. Some men do feel that this is a

tissue." (Breast reconstruction after a mastectomy is possible in men, she said).

Treatment options are basically the same for both genders.

"We treat cancers based on their biology, which is independent of gender," Jadeja said. "Everyone produces estrogen and progesterone, both men and women. Breast cancers that respond to estrogen and progesterone are treated with medications that either block estrogen/progesterone receptors or decrease how much estrogen and progesterone are produced in the body."

However, male breast cancer differs in one important aspect: Men are more likely than women to have a gene mutation that predisposed them to

breast cancer, Jadeja said. Often, their doctors will recommend genetic testing.

Because men account for only 1 percent of breast cancer patients, they travel through a treatment world that leaves them feeling like outsiders. They get their mammograms at "women's clinics," and are surrounded by pink, the emblematic color of breast cancer awareness. It can get tiresome.

"All the hospital gowns are pink!" Futterweit said. "Get grey gowns! Maybe have three of them off on the side, in a large size."

by seven weeks of radiation. This time, his vigilance meant the tumor was just Stage 0.

As a two-time cancer survivor, he now considers it his job to spread the message about male breast cancer, joining awareness groups such as the Male Breast Cancer Coalition and The Blue Wave.

What's his standard advice for men?

"At your annual physical, ask your doctor to do a breast exam," he said. "And if they look at you and say, 'What?' go find another doctor." ♦

