

Give Yourself the Gift of Life

This booklet was put together with the help and advice of other women like yourself.

As women, we spend a lot of time caring for others – in our own families, in the town we live in and among our friends. We need to take care of ourselves in order to be caregivers and to stay healthy.

Some of the things you will learn about in this booklet are:

- Breast cancer facts
- Who is at risk for breast cancer
- What it means to be screened for breast cancer
- Why this is important for you and people you love
- How to get screened for breast cancer



What is breast cancer, and what does it mean for me?

Breast cancer is a major health problem for women. It is caused by a growth that is not normal (tumor) that is located in the breast. A woman can get breast cancer at any age. Even women in their 80s or 90s can get breast cancer.

Twice as many African American women die from breast cancer as compared to white women. This is primarily due to not getting screened and only finding out when it is too late to get rid of the cancer at an early stage. If breast cancer is caught and treated early, more than 9 out of 10 women with this kind of cancer will live. Early screening picks up tumors before a woman can feel them or notice that anything is wrong. If it is not caught early, it can spread to other parts of the body, such as the brain, lungs, and bones. If it spreads to other parts of the body before it is caught, many women will die from this. That is why it is vital to be screened for breast cancer.

If it is caught early, you can be treated and go on with your life.

A True Story: Amy was 49 years old. She had a few mammograms in the past and they had all been fine, so she had let this go for a few years. She had no risk factors for cancer other than being a woman. She went for a regular visit to the doctor, and he told her she should go for another mammogram. She did, and breast cancer was found. If she did not have the mammogram, she would not have known about it until it might have been too late. She went for treatment. Today she is 56 years old and has been clear of cancer for seven years. Her 16-year-old daughter says “if my mom had died, our family would have fallen apart, and I would never have been able to do the things I can do. I am so glad she is here and that she is healthy.”



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A Quality of Life Series

Give Yourself the Gift of Life

A Guide for African American Women



Suffolk County
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What does it mean to be ‘screened’ for breast cancer? One of the best ways to find breast cancer and save your life is to get a mammogram (MAM-o-gram). This is similar to having an x-ray. The breast is held snugly between two surfaces so a picture can be taken. It takes a few minutes. While this test may not see *some* tumors, it is a good way to find *most* tumors.

How often should I have a mammogram? Even if you had a mammogram in the past and were told you had no tumors, a tumor can start to grow at any time. Some providers recommend that women have a mammogram yearly, starting at age 40, and some recommend starting at age 50. Talk to your health care provider about this.

What will it be like when I get the mammogram? It takes about 10 minutes. Your breast goes in between two flat paddles. The two paddles are pressed towards each other, and a picture of the inside of each breast is taken. Some women say they feel some discomfort from the procedure .

Why is this something I should care about? Knowing when something is wrong is better than not knowing. When you know what is wrong, you can get the help you need.

Can I just examine my breasts myself? You should do that plus regular mammograms. If you feel a lump or notice other changes, go to the doctor right away. Sometimes a tumor is too small to feel, so you should not do this instead of getting a mammogram. Do both!

Why get screened for breast cancer?

Many people believe that they will die from cancer no matter when it is found. *This is not true.* Breast cancer can be treated and cured if it is caught early enough. Most women who die from breast cancer do so because they do not go early for screenings, and by the time it is found the cancer has spread. Screenings such as mammograms can find breast cancer very early before you know that it is growing in your body.

Years ago, most women with breast cancer died from it. Today there have been many changes, such as better screenings and treatments. Now, most who have had breast cancer live long and healthy lives.

What if I cannot afford a mammogram?

Medicare (the insurance for people over age 65) and Medicaid cover the cost of mammograms. Most other insurances cover the cost as well. There are places that do mammograms for a low- or no-cost. If you do not have health insurance, you can call these numbers to help you get a mammogram: 631-548-6322 (Eastern Suffolk) or 631-376-3434 (Western Suffolk).



But I am very busy and do not have a lot of spare time. Many women are the caregivers in the family and naturally take care of others before themselves. In order to take care of others, you need to care for yourself first. A good way to think of this is to think if you were on a plane and the oxygen level dropped, and the oxygen mask dropped down, you would be directed to put the mask on yourself first, and then put it on others who depend on you. If you do not take care of yourself first, you will not be able to help anyone else.

Who is at risk to get breast cancer?

Anyone can get it. Over a lifetime, about one in every eight women will get breast cancer. However, some factors put you at a higher risk. These risks include:

- If your grandmother or mother or aunt or sister or daughter has had breast cancer;
- If you had breast cancer in the past;
- If you never gave birth, or gave birth to your first child after you were 30 years old;
- If you have had chest radiation in the past;
- If you are overweight;
- If you have a history of drinking large amounts of wine, beer, or liquor;
- If you never breastfed a baby;
- If you eat a lot of high fat foods.

Breast cancer can happen at any age, but increases for women over age 40. Talk to your health care provider about your risk.

How can I decrease my risk of breast cancer?

Many African Americans have problems with obesity and eating a lot of high fat foods. These and other risk factors should be reduced in order to lower your risk of many cancers, including breast cancer.

I believe God will take care of me and my problems. Why go for a screening?

Many people believe that God does provide for us. But it is important to keep in mind that God also made the doctors. God uses them and works through them. God will provide, but prayer and medicine work together.

Is it worth it? Yes! Here is a real story about what one family has to say about this:

Sheila was 60 years old. She had never had a mammogram. Her granddaughter asked her about this and her reply was “nothing hurts me so why bother?” After her granddaughter explained how early screening could save her life, Sheila went for a mammogram. It turns out she had breast cancer. It was caught in the early stages, she had surgery and treatment, and today she is a healthy 75 year old woman.

Her family is grateful to still have her as part of their lives. Sheila’s granddaughter feels like God was looking out for them. By Sheila taking action, her granddaughter feels God gave them the chance to take care of breast cancer before it had spread.

