

BEING RID OF BREAST CANCER

their lifetime. However, women in Malaysia still lack the awareness of breast health, failing to routinely check their breasts for irregularities or go for mammogram screenings after passing the age of 40.

Although the incidence of cancer in Malaysia is not as high as countries like Australia or the United States, the survival rate in the country is much lower, only coming up to 49 per cent compared to 89 per cent in Australia. The statistics indicate that there are fewer women with breast cancer in Malaysia, however late-stage detection comprise most of the cases which exponentially increases the mortality rate.

When breast cancer is detected while in stage one, the survival rate is close to 90 per cent as the cancer is limited within the breast and has not spread to the vascular or lymphatic system. Meanwhile, the survival rate drops to about 70 per cent in stage two and the outcome is a lot less positive. In Malaysia about 43 per cent of breast cancer patients are newly diagnosed when they are already in stages three and four.

The most common treatments to remove breast cancer are lumpectomy and mastectomy, with each procedure entailing its own unique set of benefits and risks.

Dr Lee Ching Hong,
Consultant General
Surgeon at Ara
Damansara Medical
Centre highlights the
differences between
lumpectomy and
mastectomy as breast
cancer removal
procedures and
important risk factors
to be aware of.

Breast cancer is the most common cancer among women and in 2018, two million new cases were diagnosed worldwide. A woman is diagnosed with breast cancer somewhere in the world every 15 seconds and every five minutes more than six women succumb to breast cancer worldwide.

IMPORTANCE OF EARLY DETECTION

Early detection is crucial in every cancer, more so in breast cancer. According to National Cancer Society Malaysia (NCSM) breast cancer is also the most common among women in Malaysia, affecting one in 30 women in

LUMPECTOMY

"A lumpectomy is a surgery that removes breast cancer while conserving the breast. The aim of the lumpectomy is to leave the breast looking as close to the original as possible while still removing the cancer in the breast and any surrounding tissue that has been affected," says Dr Lee.

After the procedure, the doctor will check to make sure all cancer has been removed by performing certain scans or examinations. If it is found that not all cancer has been removed, the doctor may proceed to remove more tissue or look at other options if lumpectomy may no longer be viable.

"For the best results, we would also require patients to undergo radiation therapy for a few weeks to prevent recurrent cancer and to get rid of any possibly remaining cancer cells," assures Dr Lee.

Although lumpectomy is an effective treatment for breast cancer just like mastectomy, studies indicate that lumpectomy has a slightly higher risk of recurrent cancer.

Nevertheless, it is less invasive, and, in many cases, it is a same-day procedure and patients can return home right after surgery, with a shorter recovery time.

"This procedure is only recommended for patients who have earlier stages of cancer. If we find that the cancer has spread throughout the breast or if the tumour is too big, we will recommend other procedures, including mastectomy," he continues.

MASTECTOMY

On the other hand, mastectomy entails removing the entire breast that has cancer and as such is a more invasive procedure. However, this procedure has a greater chance of averting recurrent breast cancer and lessens the risk of requiring added surgeries as well.

"Most importantly mastectomy provides patients with a peace of mind. In most cases, they don't have to worry about the side effects of radiation therapy either, which at times can be time-consuming as well as painful," explains Dr Lee.

As a more invasive procedure, mastectomy may require patients to stay longer in the hospital and necessitates a longer recovery time.

"Since it is a permanent removal of the breast, the procedure could have psychological effects on patients. It is important that we brief patients on these side effects before the surgery. Of course, patients could choose to have breast reconstruction right after mastectomy but there are still some risks of recurrence," advises Dr Lee.

RISK FACTORS

The most common risk factors for breast cancer are high-fat diet, obesity, smoking, consumption of alcohol, intake of oral contraceptives, growing older, and existing family history. However, women are often unaware of certain other risk factors.

"Most women may not be aware that breastfeeding reduces future breast cancer risk as it decreases the number of menstrual cycles in a woman's lifetime. In addition, women who have never had a full-term pregnancy, especially before the age of 30, have an increased risk of breast cancer," Dr Lee illuminates. ©



Dr Lee Ching Hong

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