

Jan Patchett's breast cancer was discovered by a routine mammogram. She was 43 years old, active and healthy with no close family history of the disease.

Although she practiced self breast exams, the tumor was the size of a "pinpoint." She attributes her survival to early detection, a loving partner and supportive friends.

When her mammogram indicated an abnormality, Patchett thought nothing of it. She was told these things show up all the time and are not usually cancer.

The doctor ordered a biopsy anyway. Patchett, a Federal Express courier who lives in Bend, arrived home from a night of bowling when her partner met her with the news.

It was cancer. "I was in total shock," Patchett says, "because I am totally healthy."

She went through with treatment: a lumpectomy, lymphectomy and radiation. One year later, she noticed a discharge from her nipple. Cancer had returned.

Patchett had a mastectomy and chemotherapy. Two years after that, the cancer returned again. This time she felt a lump in the scar tissue. Another surgery removed it.

Throughout it all, Patchett had the support of Gail Witte, her partner of 20 years, and friends. When her hair started to fall out, acquaintances decided it was a good excuse to throw a party. "We sat around on the back porch, had cocktails and shaved my head," she says.

A few days later Patchett went to work to discover six employees had shaved their heads in solidarity. Other times friends called to offer encouragement or brought meals over.

That support—and a positive attitude—was Patchett's saving grace. She will celebrate five years cancer-free Oct. 27.

KEEPING ABREAST

Lesbians should take heed of National Breast Cancer Awareness Month by Kathy Belge

The Hambleton Project provides similar support to Portland lesbians, their families and their friends who face life-threatening conditions. Volunteers assist patients with setting up a support network and providing non-medical services such as meals, housework, pet care and transportation. Their most utilized program is a support group for lesbians with cancer and their partners.

According to Hambleton volunteer coordinator Nicki Eybel, many times it's a friend who makes the first call. "There is the phenomenon in our community of incredibly independent women. I think that is a wonderful strength of our community, and it gets in our way sometimes. It's hard to admit that you need help."

October is National Breast Cancer Awareness Month. Many medical practitioners advise women older than 40 to receive yearly mammograms. Early detection is key in saving lives.

Lesbians might be at a greater risk for the disease. According to naturopathic physician Tori Hudson, it is uncertain whether they get more breast cancer, but they have a higher incidence of certain risk factors: having never birthed a child (the risk is reduced by as much as 50 percent for



Jan Patchett (left, with furry friends Annie and Miss Tucker) says she made it this far thanks to the support of her partner, Gail Witte

women who have had one child), obesity (nearly 30 percent of lesbians are obese compared to 20 percent for women overall), alcohol use (lesbians do not drink more than the general population but have a greater history of problems with alcohol) and smoking (lesbians are also more likely to use tobacco).

On top of this, Hudson reports that lesbians are less likely to perform self breast exams and to get clinical breast exams and mammograms.

Another complicating factor is that they are less likely to have health insurance, partially because many businesses do not offer domestic partner benefits. Lesbians might be less likely to visit a doctor for fear of homophobia or simply the discomfort associated with coming out.

For straight women, primary contact with the health care system is through reproductive health. Because most lesbians do not use birth control or have children, they might miss early detection of

breast cancer or other diseases that women who regularly visit the doctor are screened for.

The good news is that resources are out there. A program funded by the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention offers free screening for those with no insurance or whose coverage is not adequate. Much of the money raised in the Race for the Cure is used to pay for this service.

Although nothing is certain, some lifestyle changes might help prevent breast cancer.

Maintaining a healthy weight, consuming fewer than four alcoholic drinks a week and exercising more than 4 1/2 hours a week are all recommended strategies. Hudson cites studies indicating vegetarians and women who eat a high-fiber diet, fish, soy products, olive oil, green tea, fruits and vegetables have lower rates of breast cancer than the general population.

In the event of a cancer diagnosis, nearly everyone agrees: Get support—and get a second opinion. In the words of Jan Patchett, "Become educated, and don't go through it alone." □

For more information contact the HAMBLETON PROJECT at 503-335-6591 or www.lgbt.org/hp. For free breast cancer screenings call 800-604-CURE.

KATHY BELGE is a free-lance writer who lost a close friend to breast cancer this winter. She can be reached at kbelge@pacifier.com.

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