

Breast Cancer: A Major Health Concern for Black Women

By Zachary Lester and Maria Adebola
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When Linda Williams first learned that she had breast cancer, she felt doomed.

"Cancer seems always associated with death," Williams said. "I was feeling defeated, like I had to succumb."

October is National Breast Cancer Awareness Month. National public service organizations, professional medical associations, and government agencies work together to promote the need for women to conduct monthly breast self-exams, have annual mammograms and take control of their breast health.

According to the American Cancer Society, in 2013 about 232,340 new cases of invasive breast cancer will be diagnosed in women and about 39,620 women will die from breast cancer. There are more than 2.8 million breast cancer survivors in the United States.

Breast cancer is of particular concern to African-American women, officials said. Though White women are slightly more likely to develop breast cancer than African-American women, in women under 45, breast cancer is more common in African Americans.

African-American women also are more likely to die of breast cancer than other groups, statistics show.

"Their tumors often are found at a later, more advanced stage," according to womenshealth.org. "So, there are fewer treatment options. Some other reasons for this may include not being able to get health care or not following-up after getting abnormal test results. Other reasons may include distrust of the health care system, the belief that mammograms are not needed, or not having insurance. Also, research has shown that African-American women are more likely to get a form of breast cancer that spreads more quickly."

More prevalent among African-American women who suffer from the disease is Triple Negative Breast Cancer, which is more difficult to treat, officials said.

According to breast cancer statistics, about 85 percent of breast cancers occur in women who have no family history of the disease, due to genetic mutations that happen as a result of aging, research shows.

Several Baltimore-area women described their encounters with the dreaded disease.

Northeast Baltimore resi-



Breast cancer survivor
Linda Williams.

dent Rhonda Adams, 67, was diagnosed with having cancer in her left breast in 1993.

"My life flashed before my eyes," she said. "I lost all sense of reality."

She opted to have the breast removed, then began treatment. She said a "strong support system and prayer got me through it."

Roslyn Rogers, 61, of Baltimore, was diagnosed in May. She had a double mastectomy in August.

"It was like I heard echoes when he said it was cancer," she said. "I didn't hear anything he said after that. It took me about three or four days to face reality."

Williams had no family

history of cancer when she was diagnosed with inflammatory breast cancer in 2007. According to

The best tool, though, is early breast cancer screening

the National Cancer Institute, inflammatory breast cancer is a rare and very aggressive disease also

more common and diagnosed at younger ages in African American women than in White women.

This type of breast cancer is called "inflammatory" because symptoms of the cancer include swelling, and redness that affects a third or more of the breast.

Williams said she had noticed some redness on her breast, but she never paid attention to it. Then, one morning when she was casually stretching, she noticed something when her hand ran across her right breast.

"When I found the lump on my right breast, I went to my doctor and within a week it was confirmed that I had cancer," she said. "I was diagnosed with stage three, which means it had spread to my lymph nodes."

Doctors ordered an aggressive treatment regimen, including several weeks of chemotherapy, which she said, "took a toll" on her body.

"I was always tired," she said.

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