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BREAST MATTERS

It's breast cancer awareness month, and there's always so much more to learn and know. Turn away from October's pink-hued gimmicks and toward MOJEH's dossier on everything related to breast health, to keep you inspired and informed

WORDS BY ODELIA MATHEWS

The Bioscience Italian Institute aims to reduce mortality rates by educating about early detection

STARTING EARLY

The Helixafe prevention programme focuses on determining cancer drivers, early. Here's everything you need to know about this game-changing approach

“T

oday, the prevention of cancer is only by means of early detection, and this means treating it when it is already formed,” says Giuseppe Mucci, the award-winning visionary behind the Bioscience Italian Institute located in Dubai Healthcare City. A professor of Bioeconomy at Lugano University in Switzerland and an advisory board member of the Tor Vergata University of Rome in Italy, his Helixafe cancer prevention protocol aims to get in front of the disease, before it has a chance to take hold. “With cancer early detection, we prevent death, but not the disease. But if we consider cancer drivers, which are those physiological conditions that, when altered, drive cancer development, we can prevent cancer in the human body full stop,” he explains.

FACTS VERSUS SCIENCE

Mucci points out that mortality rates due to heart disease are 40 per cent lower than cancer because we know what conditions drive it — high cholesterol, hypertension, obesity and stress. But what about cancer drivers? “Even if the condition is undeveloped, stage zero breast cancer is often treated,” says Mucci. “If left alone, some cells can become invasive cancer cells that can spread, and the treatment option isn't any milder. That's why it's important to shift focus from early detection, known as secondary prevention, to primary prevention or, even better, from cancer interception to cancer driver interception,” he explains.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

How much does it cost? Starting from Dhs2000, the cost varies depending on the type of test that you start with.

How long does it take? The report is generated after approximately three weeks.

What are some of the preventive treatment measures? Bioscience has developed a line of dietary supplements that are used when the physiological conditions, that are analysed, are altered. Balancing the physiological conditions such as genomic instability, systemic inflammation, balance of immune system and the intestinal bacteria prevents or delays the possible development of cancer and many other diseases.



LOOKING CLOSER

While it's known that our genes determine our hereditary risk of developing cancer, it's not the only factor. The additional conditions that increase risk include chronic inflammation, bacterial imbalance and immune deficiency. Once these risk drivers are intercepted, the chances to act before the onset of any form of cancer is possible and this helps to counter the disease before it can be detected. “We are the first in the world to offer this approach for cancer prevention, moving from early detection and prevention of death by cancer to offering cancer detecting drivers and tests to determine it, and we've made great progress in the Italy and the USA,” shares Mucci, who has been recognised for his efforts in advanced stem cell research and regenerative therapies including an award for Excellence in Research & Development in Genomics by the Italian Quality Committee.

GAME-CHANGING SOLUTIONS

As the patent holder for solid cancer prodromal conditions assessment, the Helixafe prevention programme presents an in-depth analysis of gene mutations, acquired and inherited, and is the only cancer screening tool that anticipates early detection in individuals with no clinical symptoms. As for acquired or somatic mutations, these are often a result of a mismanaged lifestyle influenced by external environment stressors, lack or excess of essential nutrients such as vitamins C, D, B3 and frequent exposure to radioactive elements such as x-rays, or excessive smoking from a young age. During the prodromal stage, which is essentially the healthy stage of any individual, cells progressively accumulate mutations eventually leading to a higher risk of cancer.

Still, with the Helixbalance system, there are options for anyone who wishes to investigate risk factors further, without being limited to breast cancer only. “For this path, we take a blood sample, from which we extract the circulating DNA fragments and sequence them. With these tests it's possible to find out what is developing in the DNA and not the simple hereditary predisposition that is not modifiable,” explains Mucci, adding that there are ways to also detect lung, colon, and prostate cancers.

“With cancer early detection we prevent death, but not the disease”

GIUSEPPE MUCCI, FOUNDER AND CEO OF THE BIOSCIENCE ITALIAN INSTITUTE

STRAIGHT TALK

Dr Houriya Kazim, the UAE's first female breast surgeon and co-founder of the Well Woman Clinic, speaks to MOJEH about the essentials for women of all ages in the fight to treat and manage breast cancer



Talking about breasts is a complex matter for many women, and Dr Houriya Kazim is all too familiar with the sensitivity around breast health. As the first female breast surgeon in the UAE, she's come a long way since 1998 when she worked in a private hospital. Back then, women weren't so comfortable around the subject, and to this day, there is an anxiety associated with breast examinations around this time of year. “I think women should examine their full body as opposed to just the

breast, and get familiar with moles, lumps, bumps and everything,” she says during a conversation at the Well Woman Clinic, which she set up in 2006. “When it's just the breast, there's a lot of anxiety and it's as if women are on a witch hunt to find something, but honestly, there's no perfect time to start examining,” she explains.

Battling anxiety is one thing, and then there's dealing with fear and myths that, to this day, keep women from attending mammogram screenings which are easily available around the UAE. “The age that screening should start is topical. In the USA it's from the age of 40, and then every year, while in Europe it's from the age of 45 and then every two years, whereas in England it's at the age of 50 and then every three years,” explains Dr Houriya. However, at her own practice, she individualises the approach according to family history and several other factors. “The mammogram reveals details about the breast tissue and density. From the age of 40 and then every other year, and then every year from the age of 50, the breast tissue can change according to family history.”

Apart from family history and genetics, hormone regulation is important to watch out for, especially when new symptoms appear. “When there's something happening in the breast, it's always secondary to something happening elsewhere and it's usually picked up during the investigations,” she shares. Breast cysts can often develop as a result of polycystic ovary syndrome, which affects eight to 13 per cent of women of reproductive age, and if symptoms like irregular periods, acne or hair loss are evident, then it's best to get a check, advises Dr Houriya.

While cancer can't currently be prevented, in many cases it can certainly be managed effectively. And as for what increases chances of cancer occurring, among other things there is a direct link between alcohol consumption and breast cancer, points out Dr Houriya. She also recommends that moderate exercise is highly beneficial in

“Women should examine their full body as opposed to just the breast”

DR HOURIYA KAZIM, SURGEON AND CO-FOUNDER OF WELL WOMAN CLINIC

preventing recurrence of cancer that's been successfully treated. “The Mediterranean diet is the best to follow, which is basically a mix of fruits, vegetables, fish, whole grains and two tablespoons of olive oil a day. Post-treatment, a lot of people want to eat healthily and often switch to fruits and vegetables, but forget to have proteins which are essential to build the body back up,” she cautions, explaining the importance of maintaining protein intake.

Risk calculation and breast reconstruction are two other areas that have a massive impact on a positive outcomes. While it all begins with early detection and screening, there are several other advances that can mitigate the downsides. “We are so much better at treatments today, because we look at the biology of the tumour, the genetic mutation from the family history, and we then treat accordingly,” explains Dr Houriya. It also depends on the density of the breast tissue, hormone replacement therapies and the menstrual cycle's patterns, which could all be linked to breast cancer, and are part of risk calculation analysis.

As for breast reconstruction following a mastectomy, the choice is often down to personal preferences, and it all depends on what women want to achieve. Women today have more options than before, and reconstruction following a mastectomy is often performed during the same surgery. “When we reconstruct, we save the skin and the nipple and the tissue is removed and replaced with another material. The volume changes, and in fact, you can perk it up, or change the volume as you like,” explains Dr Houriya.

The last and most important aspect of managing breast cancer treatment is putting one's mental and emotional wellbeing first. Sharing from her years of experience of running the support group Brest Friends, Dr Houriya has seen women get through all the stages of diagnosis, treatment and recovery, often waiting until the very end to seek the emotional support they require, instead of starting before the need arises. “We are all guilty of this part, and psychological wellbeing should begin early, instead of waiting until the end,” she advises. While some women lean on faith, family, friends or work to keep their mind off things, it's not always easy to do it all with support groups, and a counsellor or a psychologist's assistance can go a long way in maintaining overall health. Ⓜ



SUPPORTING A NATION

Aisha Al Mulla, Director of Friends of Cancer Patients, opens up about the biggest cancer awareness drive in the region, available year-round. Here's everything you need to know, from where to get screened to what to do if you or someone you know needs help

Tell us about the Friends of Cancer Patients?

Friends of Cancer Patients (FoCP) was established in 1999 under the directives of HH Dr Sheikh Sultan bin Muhammad Al Qasimi, Supreme Council Member and Ruler of Sharjah. Deeply inspired by the dedication of HH Sheikha Jawaher bint Mohammed Al Qasimi, the founder and patron of FoCP, we have successfully achieved everything we set out to do throughout our 24-year journey. We empower families, children, young adults, men and women with the knowledge they need to catch early signs, lead healthy lifestyles, and focus on their wellbeing.

How many people has FoCP assisted since its inception?

I am proud to share that we have covered the treatment expenses of 2,037 cancer patients in the UAE, and offered a total of 31,114 clinical breast examinations, 8,166 mammogram screenings and 1,848 ultrasound examinations. We support all members of the UAE community, giving equal importance to all types of cancers, and we make no segregations based on gender, faith, ethnicity or socio-economic background.

What is the criteria for beneficiary selection?

FoCP's beneficiary strategies have always been inclusive and non-discriminatory, simply because of our founder and patron's vision to benefit the maximum number of people possible in the UAE and beyond. Cancer does not discriminate and neither do we. That said, we prioritise aiding and assisting individuals who are either single mothers or fathers, people who do not have stable incomes, big families who do not have enough earning members and individuals of determination and those who have special needs.

How does the Pink Caravan Ride reach people all over the UAE?

FoCP launched the Pink Caravan Ride (PCR) in 2011 as a pan-UAE breast cancer awareness initiative. It traditionally runs for seven days annually, and covers the entire length and breadth of the nation with its awareness-raising efforts. Last year, PCR delivered thousands of free early detection screenings including 2,197 clinical breast examinations, 1,019 mammograms and 208 ultrasound tests.

How can corporations get involved in order to benefit their employees?

The only one of its kind in the UAE and the region, FoCP's medical mobile clinic can be booked throughout the year by filling the Pink Caravan Mobile Clinics Booking Form as part of the Corporate Wellness Day offering, to benefit their employees with free breast ultrasounds, mammograms and cervical cancer screenings. We have confirmed 90 corporate partnerships for our Corporate Wellness Day initiative for October. The enthusiastic participation of UAE-based corporations reflects their commitment to social responsibility, as well as the UAE's overall focus on human-centric sustainable development.

How can individuals faced with a cancer journey reach out to FoCP?

Cancer treatment is expensive anywhere in the world and treatments may mean a different financial burden, one that hits during prime income-earning years. FoCP welcomes all individuals who are being treated for a malignancy or are supporting a member of their family undergoing cancer treatment to fill out the beneficiary form on our website, to be considered for financial support.

"We empower families, children, young adults, men and women with the knowledge they need to catch early signs"

AISHA AL MULLA, DIRECTOR OF FOCP

Genetics are not the only factor that can increase the chances of breast cancer



THINGS I WOULD LIKE TO TELL ANY WOMAN BATTLING BREAST CANCER

Cancer survivor Josette Awwad is the co-founder of Azyaamode and JALC Luxury Consultancy. She shares a few intimate details from her journey battling cancer to help those in a similar place

1.

Early detection: Breast cancer is often easier to treat when it's detected in its early stages. Early detection not only improves your chances of overcoming

breast cancer but it can also mitigate some of the challenges your children or loved ones may face during this difficult time. Regular screenings can catch it before it spreads to other parts of the body, which was my case. I would highly recommend screening at an appropriate age, which is usually recommended at around 40, or earlier if there's a family history or other risk factors, but I would say that it is best to start earlier, which in my case was as early as 30.

2.

Dealing with anxiety: I was blessed from day one as I was guided by D. Houriya Kazim and then I chose to fly back to my home country in Lebanon for the necessary treatment. Together with my specialised doctors, I decided to move forward with a double mastectomy even though my cancer was on the left breast. Post operation, it took me a while to proceed with the next stage of breast reconstruction, and this is a personal choice for every woman, so it is best to choose what works for you. A prompt diagnosis and treatment plan can reduce the anxiety and uncertainty that a cancer diagnosis can bring to your family.

3.

Emotional wellbeing: I cannot put enough emphasis on the importance of wellbeing, especially if you have a family, and are a mother. Women are the centre of each family and if you are mentally and emotionally well, everyone around you will feel safe and secure. When breast cancer is detected at an early stage, the chances of successful treatment and survival are significantly higher. This means you have a better chance of being there for your children as they grow up. Your parents, children and loved ones will find it less distressing when they understand what's happening and see that you are receiving appropriate care. I believe that my greatest emotional support came from my family and faith. You need to have faith that every loss will lead you to other things that are better for you. Having open and honest communication with everyone will impact so many lives.

4.

Helping children cope: A positive attitude can be a powerful life lesson for your children. From you, they can learn about strength, courage and the importance of facing challenges head-on. Children may experience a range of emotions when a parent is diagnosed with breast cancer, but early detection can help minimise the emotional toll. Seeking professional counselling or involving support groups can offer additional emotional support for both you and your children. 🕊

Josette Awwad underwent a double mastectomy during her cancer journey

