



Sue Ann Says: Know Your Risks, Save Your Life

My daughter Tommi and I are breast cancer survivors, but my mother was not so lucky. Diagnosed with breast cancer when she was just 34, mother fought the disease for over three decades before she died at age 70. The information my daughter and I had on cancer prevention, early detection and treatment is what made the difference—and saved our lives.

I talked with my friend Jill Kolesar, Pharm.D. about how women can assess their risk for cancer. Jill knows her stuff, being a faculty supervisor at the UW-Madison Comprehensive Cancer Center. She gave me some great advice that I'd like to share with you.

“If you want to prevent cancer, the first thing you need to do is quit smoking,” Jill emphasized. She explained that while breast cancer is the most often diagnosed form of cancer among women, lung cancer is the leading cause of cancer death in women.

Cigarette smoking and alcohol consumption are the major risk factors in head and neck cancers. Many smokers reach for the cigarettes when they are having a drink, but smoking combined with alcohol is especially dangerous. Jill told me that studies show a significantly increased risk for head and neck cancers when cigarette and alcohol use is combined. Why? These areas of the body are being exposed to two different types of very harmful carcinogens simultaneously.

Drinking also increases your risk for obesity—which plays a major role in the onset of breast and colon cancer, Jill said. Generally, women who have larger amounts of estrogen are at greater risk for developing these cancers than women with less estrogen. Estrogen is produced in our ovaries and fat tissues. Thus, if you are obese, you have more fat tissues producing more estrogen—increasing your risk for these cancers.

Exercise and a healthy diet are the best ways to prevent obesity and reduce your cancer risk. Talk with your doctor about an effective exercise plan to reduce your risks not only of cancer, but of heart disease, high blood pressure and osteoporosis. Jill recommended a healthy diet of foods rich in fiber and low in fat. She suggested incorporating more whole grain products and fresh fruits and vegetables into your diet. Jill also advised reducing the amount of processed foods you eat because they are often high in preservatives, sodium and fat. Fresh foods are the healthiest choice.

Above all, regular cancer screenings are especially critical to cancer prevention. “Early detection is our best defense today,” Jill explained, “It is so important that people know their family history and their risk factors, and communicate with their doctors.”

Research your family health history and share this information with your physicians. If you have at least two “first-degree” relatives, (a parent, sibling or child) who have been diagnosed with cancer before the age of 50, ask your doctor about early screening options or even a referral to an oncology specialist.

Besides genetics, age is a crucial risk factor for cancer. The older you are, the longer you have been exposed to cancer causing elements. Stay on top of your cancer screenings as you get older.

People typically begin receiving cancer screenings by about age 40, but talk with your doctor about your family history or other factors that would increase your risk. Also perform breast self-exams weekly so you can easily detect any differences that might occur. And be sure to have regular mammograms and colonoscopies. These screenings can save your life.

I hope you take these tips to heart and pass them on to your family, friends and anyone you care about. I truly believe that knowledge is power, because knowledge and a good doctor saved my life and my daughter’s. Remember, it all begins with a healthy woman!

Yours in good health,

Sue Ann Thompson
Founder & President
Wisconsin Women’s Health Foundation

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