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Sue Ann Says: Can Aspirin Help Prevent the Return of Breast Cancer?

Who would've thought that something as simple as aspirin may help prevent the return of breast cancer! But then again, when German chemist, Felix Hoffman, discovered aspirin in 1897 to relieve his father's rheumatoid (ain't Google grand?), I don't think he knew how far-reaching its effects would be.

The link between aspirin and cancer is already a powerful one. We know it cuts the risk for colon and prostate cancer, and helps prevent heart disease and stroke. And, now it may be a weapon for keeping breast cancer at bay.

An observational study (not a gold standard trial, mind you) of more than 4,000 women who were diagnosed with breast cancer, showed that those who took aspirin in the period after diagnosis – usually to prevent heart disease – had a 50 percent lower risk of dying from breast cancer and a 50% lower risk that the cancer would spread.

According to Dr. Michelle Holmes of the Harvard Medical School who led the study, "We are beginning to realize that cancer is an inflammatory disease, and aspirin is an anti-inflammatory." Cancer cells produce more inflammatory chemicals than normal breast cells; lab tests show that aspirin keeps breast tumor cells from growing and invading other tissue.

"However," Dr. Holmes warns, "patients should not take aspirin while undergoing radiation or chemotherapy because of the risk of side effects. And, it can cause stomach bleeding so it should not be taken without your doctor's care. Aspirin should never take the place of medicines already prescribed by your health care provider."

Still, if a woman who had breast cancer is already taking aspirin, like me, she might take comfort in knowing that perhaps she is also helping to keep her breast cancer from coming back. And that gives a lot of us hope.

So, while we await the proof, here are measures you can take to maximize your own health to prevent breast cancer recurrence:

Get to a healthier weight:	Fat cells can produce and store estrogen; too much estrogen can stimulate the growth of breast cells. Sticking to a low fat diet and decreasing body weight can decrease risk of recurrence.
Exercise	Exercise boosts the immune system, enhances energy levels, and controls weight thus reducing the risk of recurrence.

Reduce your alcohol intake	Better yet, stop drinking. More than five drinks per week can increase the risk for recurrence.
Quit smoking	It absolutely increases the risk for breast cancer and its recurrence.
Limit or avoid use of estrogen/progesterone pills for peri- and postmenopausal symptoms	The combination may increase the risk for recurrence.
Talk to your health care provider.	About selective estrogen receptor modulators, aromatase inhibitors, and prophylactic mastectomy – protective factors that may decrease recurrence.

Until a real trial takes place, health care providers cannot determine the strength of the aspirin and the cancer link. However, these observational results – and aspirin’s additional health benefits – might encourage you to talk with your doctor about taking this historic little pill.

Because it all begins with a healthy woman.



Sue Ann Thompson
 Founder & President
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The Wisconsin Women’s Health Foundation (WWHF) is a statewide non-profit organization whose mission is to help Wisconsin women and their families reach their healthiest potential. WWHF provides programs and conducts forums that focus on education, prevention, early detection, and connecting individuals to resources; produces and distributes the most up-to-date health education and resource materials; and, awards grants and scholarships to women health researchers and related community non-profits. Your donations help WWHF reach women all over Wisconsin with the information, resources and tools they need to be healthy. To make a donation or to learn more, visit wwhf.org or call 1-800-448-5148.