

Routine Mammogram Detects Aggressive Form of Breast Cancer



At the age of 58, Jamie Bernard considered herself to be relatively healthy. She had no family history of cancer, she exercised, consumed a healthy diet and enjoyed an active lifestyle. She was stunned when a routine mammogram revealed a suspicious mass that was later diagnosed as Triple Negative Breast

Cancer, a virulent and aggressive form of the disease. “I was shocked,” notes Jamie, upon receiving news of the diagnosis. “I was under the impression that breast cancer only happened to women with a family history. It never occurred to me that I would have this.”

Breast cancer strikes more than 211,000 women each year, and in 2009, the year that the most recent statistics are available, more than 40,000 women died as a result. Breast cancer is often a silent disease, with virtually no symptoms, but it is often completely curable if diagnosed in its early stages. The majority of those diagnosed with breast cancer each year have no family history of the disease, making it all the more important for women to get an annual mammogram. According to data compiled recently by the Komen for the Cure® North Jersey Affiliate, almost 33% of women over the age of 40 who reside in Sussex County have not had a mammogram in the past year, a percentage which is marginally better than some of the other counties in the agency’s 9-county service area in northern New Jersey. However, Sussex County has the highest incidence of incurable breast cancer in the state, primarily because the cancer is not being detected at its earliest, most curable, stage. The average 5-year mortality rate across all ethnic groups in Sussex County is 33.4%, almost 7 percentage points higher than the 9-county average of 26.5%.

Early detection is essential in the fight against breast cancer; the survival rate for women who detected breast cancer in its earliest stages has reached 98%. A mammogram is 85% - 90% effective at detecting breast cancer. Mammograms may detect breast cancer up to two years before they can be felt through clinical or self-examinations. Recent studies have shown that mammography can reduce the chances of death from breast cancer by 30%. Early diagnosis is the key to a cure, and urging women to get a mammogram can be the difference between life and death.

Jamie was treated with surgery, four rounds of chemotherapy and six weeks of radiation. Although her hair fell out as a result, she was not upset. “It was just hair. I knew it would grow back. I advise anyone who is going through chemotherapy to get a good wig, unless you are the kind of person who can rock the bald head!”

Jamie’s three adult children, her husband and her many friends supported her during her treatment and recovery. “My children are scattered all over the country and they all flew in for my surgery. They handled it well and were very supportive. My husband was amazing. People want to know what they can do to help a friend with cancer. Phone calls, cards, notes and meals are wonderful. It’s nice to know that you have support from friends and family.”

Jamie Bernard serves as the Executive Director of the local non-profit agency Domestic Abuse & Sexual Assault Intervention Services (DASI). The agency is on-call 24 hours a day to help local victims of abuse. Jamie took occasional days off and worked from home on those days when she was feeling too fatigued to make it into the office. “My job is not necessarily the type where you can have a long number of days off. Everyone at my agency is extremely supportive and very competent. I felt very fortunate that I was able to stay current and take the days off which I did need.”

Since her cancer was diagnosed by a routine mammogram, Jamie is adamant that routine mammograms are essential in the fight against breast cancer. “The annual mammogram is critically important. I have talked about the importance of routine mammograms to every friend and colleague. I have become a pain-in-the-neck with my children.” As a result of her advocacy, one of her friends obtained a mammogram and received a positive breast cancer diagnosis. “I felt glad to have been annoying!” jokes Jamie now. “Having cancer has definitely changed me. It took me by surprise. You can’t help but feel vulnerable and feel like anything can happen. I changed my diet. I eat mostly organic foods, I cut out red meat and alcohol, and I added more exercise.” To celebrate her recovery, she vacationed with her family. “It made me realize that you should do what’s important. Don’t put things off. I live a little bit more in the moment.”

Free mammograms and pap tests are available through the New Jersey Cancer Education and Early Detection (NJCEED) program administered by the Sussex County Health Department. Follow-up diagnostics, including additional mammography views, breast ultrasounds, and biopsies are also available. Interested participants are encouraged to call 973-579-0750, ext. 1246. In addition, Newton Medical Center will provide a free mammogram for women who qualify through the Newton Medical Center Foundation’s “Mammograms Save Lives” program. Those without health insurance are encouraged to contact Newton Medical Center’s Education/Outreach office at 973-579-8340 for more information.

