

Retired Educator Recommends Mammograms



Retired educator Theresa Williams was diligent about getting an annual mammogram because she had a history of developing benign cysts. When her routine exam detected a suspicious mass, Theresa recalls, “I was a little bit nervous but I didn’t get myself too excited.” Her medical team followed up with a biopsy which confirmed that she had breast cancer. However, the cancer was detected at such an early stage, Theresa did not need to undergo chemotherapy. Theresa Williams recounts that her physician, breast surgeon Dr. Michelle O’Shea, remarked, “You’re a poster child for why mammograms save lives.”

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.

Dr. O’Shea notes Sussex County women are still not being proactive enough when it comes to early detection. “In Sussex County, approximately 69% of surveyed women say that they are aware of mammogram recommendations and have access to screening. In my daily practice, however, I do encounter patients who have not gone for mammograms out of fear of a detected cancer. I tell them it does improve breast cancer survival to detect an unknown cancer in the breast rather than to wait to be able to feel the lump or to feel the lump and deny that it exists. In Theresa’s case, the mammogram changes did lead us to find an early breast cancer that may not have been felt or otherwise seen on mammography for another two years.”

Theresa followed up her mammogram with a minor surgical procedure and only 20 days of radiation. She experienced virtually no side effects, and she felt so good that she took a vacation almost immediately. “I was lucky.”

Theresa praises the support given to her by her friends and family. Theresa lost her sister-in-law and a close friend to various forms of cancer, so she encouraged her husband to accompany her the doctor so that he could ask his own questions. “My husband is my rock, but he was nervous.” She also appreciates the care she received from her local medical team. “My radiologist was smart enough to refer me to a breast surgeon immediately.”

Theresa has no patience for those who avoid getting a mammogram. “Get the test. It doesn’t hurt and it doesn’t take that long. If you have cancer, the earlier it is detected, the better. Things have changed. They have made great strides in treating breast cancer.”

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.

