

Breast cancer most common in older men



ST PHOTOS: CAROLINE CHIA

Awareness about female breast cancer is high. Numerous campaigns persuade women to undergo mammogram screenings and pink ribbons are sold to raise the profile of the disease.

Also, there are numerous support groups here for female breast cancer patients, such as those run by hospitals, the Singapore Cancer Society and the Breast Cancer Foundation.

Female breast cancer survivors have even banded together. One such group formed a sports team, the dragon-boating Pink Paddlers who regularly train together and take part in international competitions.

While there are numerous avenues of support for female breast cancer patients, male sufferers of the same disease are very often adrift and isolated.

"Breast cancer in men is very rare," said Dr Tan Su-Ming, head of breast service and acting chief of surgery at Changi General Hospital.

Figures from the Singapore Cancer Registry show that between 1998 and 2002, 25 men were diagnosed with breast cancer, compared to 5,499 women.

This means that men made up less than 0.5 per cent of all breast cancer patients in

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Dr Tan Su-Ming

Singapore.

While there are no differences between female and male breast cancers in terms of signs and symptoms, breast cancer does affect both genders differently.

"In men, the cancer tends to be closer to the chest wall because there is so little breast tissue. Hence, mastectomy (removal of the whole breast) is the most common operation," said Dr Tan.

Also, because of the fact that breast cancer is perceived by many to be a "female" disease, male patients face a unique set of psychological issues.

"Of course it is already difficult for anyone diagnosed with breast cancer," said Dr Tan.

"Because it is more common to hear about breast cancer in women than in men, it may be particularly difficult for the men. They may feel very confused and isolated. It can even be difficult for them to believe such a diagnosis."

As is the case of female breast cancer, early detection of male breast cancer is an important factor in successful treatment.

"The symptoms of breast cancer in men are no different from that of women - a lump, nipple discharge, nipple retraction and skin dimpling," said Dr Tan.

"But because male breast cancer is so rare, there is no national screening programme. Hence, if a man should notice any of these symptoms, he should see a doctor immediately."

There are also identifiable risk factors which increase the likelihood of a man suffering from breast cancer.

Age is a big risk factor, as breast cancer in men is most common between the ages of 60 and 70, said Dr Tan.

Family history is also important, she added, and "if a man has a close relative, such as a mother or sister, with breast cancer, he may have a greater chance of developing the disease".

Men who have undergone medical treatment in their early years that exposed their chest to radiation, or who have taken oestrogen-related drugs, are also likely to be at a higher risk of breast cancer.

Liver disease, or cirrhosis of the liver, may also be a contributing factor, as the body's androgen activity may be reduced and its oestrogen activity greater. This can increase a man's risk of breast cancer, said Dr Tan.

Lisabel Ting

0.5%
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Singapore are men