

# Cancer is not a curse



**DR BALAMURUGANA  
VELLAYAPPAN**

Breast cancer remains an important health problem in our society. The incidence of breast cancer in Singapore has doubled in

the last 20 years.

Among Singaporean Indian women, 615 cases were diagnosed between 2011 and 2015. Compared to Indian women in the sub-continent, the incidence among Indian women in developed countries (the United Kingdom, the United States and Singapore) is higher.

This is partially attributed to lifestyle changes that come with living in developed countries – such as being overweight and sedentary. Another possibility is the vast amount of spices that are still used in the sub-continent – such as turmeric, ginger, pepper, clove and cumin – which apparently have anti-cancer properties.

The good news is that breast cancer can be picked up at an early stage when a cure is highly likely and treatment side-effects are less. For example, patients with stage 1 breast cancer have a 90 per cent chance of being cured, versus stage 4 (spread to other organs such as brain, lung and liver) patients who are likely to succumb to their disease.

So what can you do about it?

- Maintain a healthy weight, get physically active, do not smoke or consume alcohol
- Early child-bearing and breastfeeding have been shown to be beneficial
- Reduce the use of oestrogen-containing medications
- Breast cancer screening, done through X-

ray imaging of the breast (mammogram), allows the early detection of abnormalities. It is subsidised by the government and is recommended to be done once in two years for women (without any symptoms) between the ages of 50 and 70.

● If you have symptoms such as lump in the breast or armpit or bloody nipple discharge, seek early medical attention

Over the years, through dedicated research, we have been able to understand breast cancer better. It is not “one disease” and various sub-types of breast cancer behave differently.

Treatment has to be individualised according to the sub-type. Importantly, treatment methods and techniques have improved vastly – allowing us to minimise side-effects and improve cure rates. This reiterates the fact that early detection and intervention are essential to have a good quality and quantity of life.

My personal experience with patients is that a diagnosis of cancer comes as a wake-up call for them. Patients take stock of what’s important in their lives and it gives them an opportunity to re-prioritise and cherish family and friends. One can argue that, without this event, they would be still chasing material comforts.

As such, a cancer diagnosis is not a curse – there is no need to shy away from talking about it. Get detected, get treated, get cured.

➔ [tabla@sph.com.sg](mailto:tabla@sph.com.sg)

*Dr Balamurugan A Vellayappan is a consultant at the Department of Radiation Oncology, National University Cancer Institute Singapore and assistant professor at Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, National University of Singapore*