

Breast Cancer and Young People

If you are a woman over the age of 45, chances are you have started getting an annual screening mammogram for breast cancer, or perhaps you started these even sooner. In recent years, the push for annual screening mammograms to start at age 40 has increased due to a rise in breast cancer cases among young people. However, women even younger than 40 are being diagnosed with breast cancer – and at a later stage that is more aggressive and harder to treat. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), one in eight women will be diagnosed with breast cancer, and one in 10 of those diagnosed will be under the age of 45. This is why health experts urge women to know their family history and to discuss it with their health care provider early on.

Deborah Oyelowo, Hematology/Oncology APRN, OSF HealthCare

“Once your doctor knows that your mom or your aunt or your grandmother had a form of breast cancer, they will have a scheduled plan for you on when to go depending on risk factors. For example, if it’s your mom, screening typically starts by the time you are 25 to 30 years old. Early screening is the key.” (:24)

If you do not know your family history, let your provider know that as well. Not all cases, however, have a known family history of breast cancer. Most recently, a story made headlines of a young woman in California with no family history of the disease who was diagnosed with Stage 4 breast cancer at age 29. Stories like this are unfortunately becoming more common. Oyelowo advises women to start talking to their primary care provider about in-office breast exams once they turn 18. We have our tonsils, eyes, and ears checked during our annual doctor visits, so our breasts should be examined as well. [Self-exams](#) are also important for detecting breast cancer early.

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“People ages 20 to 30-years-old are having a later stage diagnosis due to delay in self-exams or assessments. You need to know what you are looking for and what it should feel like. There are a lot of hormonal changes, but if we know what to look out for in self assessments, we can catch it before it’s late.” (:24)

Self-exams are recommended once a month so any lumps can be detected early on. If you do feel a lump during a self-exam, don’t panic, but make an appointment to have it assessed.

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“Every lump needs to be checked out by someone. It could be your primary care doctor. And if that lump is concerning to your primary care doctor, they will send you for a special assessment or they can do an ultrasound. It does not have to be a mammogram, it can be an ultrasound. If that is done and it suggests a mammogram, then we go from there.” (:20)

A breast cancer may not always present as a noticeable lump, which is another reason it sometimes is missed at an early stage – especially in younger people who may not be getting an annual screening mammogram. Other signs to watch for and to pay attention to during self-exams include changes in color, changes in skin texture or skin dryness, skin dimpling, breast or nipple pain, or nipple discharge. Checking the lymph nodes is also important, as breast cancer can sometimes present as a swollen node in the underarm or collarbone area. If you feel a swollen lymph node in that area, Oyelowo recommends letting your doctor know and have it assessed.

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“If it’s painful, it could be a boil or an abscess. But if it’s not painful and it’s just a nodule in your underarm, it feels cold, and your arm doesn’t have the same sensation as the other one, have someone check it.” (:12)

Breast cancer does not discriminate. Everyone with breasts is at risk of developing breast cancer, and some young people who are diagnosed with breast cancer may not even have any of the known risk factors. This is why self-exams and listening to your body is so important. Oyelowo says to trust your gut if something feels off.

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“If you think there is something wrong and you don’t feel like yourself and someone told you everything looks good and fine, but the swelling is getting bigger or it’s not painful, I don’t think we should wait around. This is why we should continue to see our doctor regularly. But if they are reassuring you that everything is fine, but personally you have a voice in the back of your head telling you to check it out, I would seek a second opinion.” (:28)

Resources:

- [American Cancer Society](#)
- [Breastcancer.org](#)
- [Know Your Lemons](#)
- [National Breast Cancer Foundation](#)