

Dense breast diagnosis: What's next?

A beloved actress from one of America's most popular TV shows has shared the story of her breast cancer journey with the world.

Jenna Fischer, widely known as Pam from "The Office," announced on social media she was diagnosed with Stage 1 Triple Positive breast cancer in December 2023.

The 50-year-old's cancer journey unknowingly began after her routine mammogram in October 2023. She tells The Today Show's Hoda Kotb that her doctor called with the results, saying they were fine, but that there were a few spots that were difficult to see. The doctor added that Fischer has very dense breast tissue.

Fischer went in for a follow-up breast ultrasound and received the news on her patient portal while on a hike by herself.

"I checked the portal on the hike, and that's when I saw words like 'invasive,' 'ductal,' 'carcinoma,' 'malignant,'" Fisher told Kotb. "And I was like, 'Those words sound like cancer words.'"

Nearly one year later, Fischer announced that she completed surgery, chemotherapy and radiation and is now cancer free. She hopes by sharing her story, she can provide comfort and hope to other women receiving similar diagnoses.

Jamin Addae, MD, is a breast surgeon with OSF HealthCare. He says having dense breast tissue does not necessarily mean you have breast cancer, but it does indicate that you have a higher chance of developing the disease.

Different types of breast tissue

"Dense breast tissue is absolutely normal. Like everything else in life, there are variations of things. You don't have one thing being the same in everybody. Breasts are made of different tissues and some of them we call fatty tissues, which are plain fat. Then we have glandular tissue which is the tissue that forms all the glands that produce milk," Dr. Addae says. "Then you also have the fibrous tissue that supports the breast itself."

Dr. Addae says seeing the combination of the three types of tissue helps determine how dense the breasts are. He recommends getting routine breast screenings once you reach the age of 40, which is recommended by the American Cancer Society.

That way if you end up having dense breast tissue, your physician may recommend additional imaging to better assess the breast if the needs should arise. Fischer's story is a perfect example of this.

"Knowing that you have dense breast tissue makes you aware that you have a slightly increased risk than someone who doesn't have dense breast tissue," Dr. Addae says. "It also makes you aware that it's more challenging to read your mammograms, compared to somebody who just has fatty tissue or fatty breasts."

Technology advances helping survival rates, quality of life

Dr. Addae says the number one technology helping breast surgeons do what they do are what are called localization devices.

"If it's a small, five-millimeter area of calcification, you should be able to get that area out without taking the whole breast off. But that's a big challenge and I think the localization devices have made it possible for us to have a little clip placed in that area. So, in the operating room, we're able to go exactly where the five-millimeter tumor is, only take out that area and conserve the rest of the breast," Dr. Addae says. "There's also a lot of improvements we're having in treatments. We have better chemotherapy and immunotherapy, which we consider systemic therapy. Radiation is also improving. These have all translated into much better survival rates and quality of life for our patients, compared to 20 or 30 years ago."

Dr. Addae adds that oncoplastic surgery, which includes combining plastic surgery techniques that improve cosmetic appearance in breast cancer surgery have also led to an improvement in aesthetic outcomes and quality of life of breast cancer survivors.

Ways to decrease the risk of breast cancer

- Stop smoking
- Decrease the amount of alcohol you drink
- Maintain a healthy weight
- Eat healthy
- Be physically active
- Breastfeed
- Know your family history
- Avoid hormone replacement therapy

Factors that increase the risk of breast cancer

- Female at birth
- Older age
- Immediate family member has or has had breast cancer
- Genetic mutations
- Hormone replacement therapy
- Early onset of menstrual cycle (before 12 years old)
- Late menopause (menopause after 55 years)
- Dense breast tissue
- Smoking
- Alcohol
- Post menopausal obesity
- Physical inactivity
- Never breast-fed
- No full-term pregnancies
- Radiation treatment for Hodgkin's lymphoma