



For many women in The Bahamas, finding a lump in their breast shatters their lives, leaving them numb and propelling them into a world of fear and uncertainty, especially as they think about their plans for the future and the well-being of their loved ones. "Who is going to take care of my kids, will I ever get married, and how will I pay for treatment?" are just a few of the numerous questions that race through their minds after hearing their doctor confirm their worst fear: they have Breast Cancer.

Breast Cancer, one of the most common cancers affecting women worldwide, occurs when cells in the breast grow abnormally and multiply, eventually forming a tumor that negatively affects the body's functioning. While some Breast Cancers stay in the original tissue, according to the Cleveland Clinic, approximately 80% become invasive, spreading from the breast to other areas of the body.

Facts About Breast Cancer in The Bahamas

- ❖ In The Bahamas, Breast Cancer is the most prevalent cancer affecting women, with health officials estimating 300-500 new cases each year.
- ❖ 48% of women diagnosed in The Bahamas are under 50.
- ❖ The average age of diagnosis in The Bahamas is 42, much higher than in the United States, where the average age of diagnosis is 62.
- ❖ 44% of Breast Cancers in The Bahamas are diagnosed at Stage 3 and Stage 4, when the disease has spread and becomes difficult to treat.

Types of Breast Cancer

Due to there being different types of Breast Cancer, each with its own characteristics, healthcare providers must diagnose a patient's exact Breast Cancer type to tailor their treatment to one that is effective with the least possible side effects. As stated by the Cleveland Clinic, the most common types of Breast Cancer are:

- ❖ Invasive (infiltrating) ductal carcinoma (IDC): This is the most common type of Breast Cancer and develops in the milk ducts before spreading to nearby tissues.
- ❖ Lobular breast cancer: This is the second most common Breast Cancer and starts in the milk-producing glands.

- ❖ Ductal carcinoma in situ (DCIS): Similar to IDC, this Breast Cancer starts in the milk ducts. However, unlike IDC, it stays in the milk ducts and does not spread to surrounding breast tissue.

Symptoms

Since Breast Cancer affects women differently, many experience symptoms that differ from each other, while some do not have any symptoms at all. When Breast Cancer symptoms occur, according to the Cleveland Clinic, they may include a new lump in the breast or underarm (armpit), thickening or swelling of part of the breast, irritation or dimpling of breast skin, redness or flaky skin in the nipple area or the breast, pulling in of the nipple or pain in the nipple area, nipple discharge other than breast milk, including blood, and a change in the size or the shape of the breast.

Why are Bahamian Women at High Risk for Breast Cancer?

During her study of Bahamian women diagnosed with Breast Cancer, Dr. Judith Hurley, a medical oncologist and researcher at the University of Miami, discovered that 23-25% of them have the BRCA1 gene mutation – an inherited gene that makes women more susceptible to developing this disease. In fact, various studies have found that among countries worldwide, The Bahamas has one of the highest percentages of women carrying BRCA1 and BRCA2 genetic mutations.

Other factors that put Bahamian women at risk include:

- ❖ A family history
- ❖ Smoking
- ❖ Drinking beverages containing alcohol
- ❖ Having obesity
- ❖ Radiation exposure

Diagnosis

Along with reviews of patients' medical histories and physical examinations, the Cleveland Clinic states that healthcare providers conduct the following tests to diagnose Breast Cancer:

- ❖ Breast ultrasound
- ❖ Breast magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scan
- ❖ Breast biopsy
- ❖ Immunohistochemistry test to check for hormone receptors.
- ❖ Genetic tests to identify mutations that cause breast cancer.

Treatment

For most women diagnosed with Breast Cancer, the Cleveland Clinic explains, the primary form of treatment is surgery, either in the form of a lumpectomy or mastectomy. A lumpectomy removes the cancerous tissues of the breast, while a mastectomy removes the entire breast.

Typically, in cases where the cancer has spread, doctors pair surgery with one or more of the following treatments: chemotherapy, radiation therapy, immunotherapy, hormone therapy, or targeted therapy.

Prevention

While there is no concrete way to completely prevent Breast Cancer, Bahamian women, as recommended by organizations like the American Cancer Society and the Cleveland Clinic, can implement the following to reduce their risk:

- ❖ Maintaining a healthy weight
- ❖ Eating a healthy diet rich in lean protein, vegetables, and fruits
- ❖ Exercising regularly
- ❖ Avoiding or limiting alcohol consumption
- ❖ Refraining from smoking tobacco

Furthermore, Bahamian women should also perform regular breast self-exams and receive mammograms, as this can help them detect Breast Cancer in its early stages, when it's more responsive to treatment.

How is the Cancer Society helping?

At the Cancer Society, we assist people with cancer and their caregivers by providing programs and services that can help them emotionally and mentally cope with their diagnosis and reduce the financial burden of their treatment. Some of the programs and services we offer include:

- ❖ Cancer Caring Centre – provides free accommodations for Family Islanders undergoing cancer treatment in New Providence.
- ❖ Adult Support Group – offers emotional and mental support.
- ❖ Freedom Kids Club – helps children diagnosed with cancer live normal childhoods by holding events catered to their disease.
- ❖ Assist with Port-a-Caths and port needles.

Also, throughout the year, we hold free clinics on Family Islands that include clinical breast examinations, allowing women to detect and treat Breast Cancer in its early, most treatable stages.

To learn more about what the Cancer Society is doing, subscribe to our newsletter at www.cancersocietybahamas.org/newsletter. Call us at (242) 323-4441 or (242) 325-2483 or email us at admin@cancersocietybahamas.org to become a volunteer, be a spokesperson, and advocate for a healthier Bahamas.

