

# THE HINDU

## Health

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### Take the pink ribbon seriously

With October being observed internationally as Breast Cancer Awareness Month, the pink ribbon has become a common sight.

The need for such an active campaign for breast cancer awareness can be seen in the staggering number of cases registered.

According to the population-based cancer registry, collated by Indian Council of Medical Research between 2006 and 2008, Bangalore had one of the highest incidences of breast cancer in the country, with more than 36 people detected with the cancer per 100,000 persons.

Other metros too show a similar high incidence of breast cancer. "There is an increasing trend in the country in the last five to 10 years, especially in the urban parts of India," said Mahesh Bandemegal, surgical oncologist, HCG hospital.

With breast cancer now being detected among young women (below 40), Niti Raizada, medical oncologist, Vikram Hospital, Bangalore, said: "Breast cancer is now the leading cancer among women, replacing cervical cancer."

#### Men also

What is lesser known is that men are susceptible to breast cancer too, with one in 100 patients being male. "Though very rare, men do have non-healing ulcers, lumps in the armpit or a tumour in the chest valve, all signifying breast cancer," said Dr. Raizada.

Doctors attribute the rise of breast cancer to factors associated with urban lifestyles — obesity, unhealthy diet, sedentary lifestyle and delayed childbirth for women. "Non-modifiable factors like genetics too play a major role increasing risk by about 10 per cent," said Dr. Raizada.

While breast cancer is not preventable, it is treatable in its early stages. However, doctors agree that while awareness was increasing among women, a majority of cancer is still detected only in the advanced stages.

"Awareness about breast cancer is inadequate. Three-fourths of the patients come to medical centres only in advanced stages of cancer," said K.B. Lingegowda, Head of Department of Palliative Medicine, Kidwai Memorial Institute of Oncology.

#### Annual screening

Doctors recommend that women over 40 years get an annual screening, which should supplement monthly self-examinations or clinical examinations. However, Dr. Lingegowda said, "Hardly anyone opts for annual screenings or routine check-ups."

The lack of awareness, coupled with notions of taboo and lack of adequate facilities in hospitals, especially in tier II cities, make cancer detection too late, said Dr. Bandemegal. If detected in its early stages, he said, it can be easily treated with survival rate being more than 90 per cent.

#### Treatment options

"Multi-modal treatment, chemotherapy, targeted therapy and immunotherapy can be used to treat cancer in its different stages," Dr. Raizada said. "With modern surgical techniques, the breast need not be removed entirely to remove malignant tissues. Instead, only the tumour is shrunk and removed."

However, with most cases being detected in the advanced stages, the probability of survival reduces to around 40 per cent for Stage 3 (advanced growth) cancer patients. "For Stage 4 patients there is no cure for the cancer. It is only a matter of controlling pain," said Dr. Bandemegal.

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