

# Understanding Breast Cancer

To mark the International Month for Breast Cancer Awareness this October, the Jordan Breast Cancer Program is launching a nation-wide campaign aimed at raising awareness about breast cancer. Here's what you need to know.



**W**hy focus on the 40+ age factor? Your chances of developing breast cancer increase with age. According to the Jordan National Cancer Registry in 2005, more than 80 percent of breast cancer cases in Jordan are women older than 40. Only 15 percent of new cancer cases are in the age group 30-39, while this percentage doubles (31 percent) for the age group 40-49.

#### What is a mammogram?

A mammogram is a breast X-ray image and is the primary screening tool widely available for detecting breast cancer early. Mammography can detect small lumps before they can be felt and uses a minimal amount of radiation that is not harmful to women when conducted over annual intervals.

#### Are mammograms painful?

During a mammogram, breasts are pressed between two plastic plates in at least two positions. This flattens the

breast tissue so that the image produced will be clear. Patients who are sensitive should schedule their mammograms a week after their menstrual cycle so that the breasts are less tender.

#### Can mammograms help prevent breast cancer?

A mammogram cannot prevent breast cancer; however, mammography is an excellent tool to screen for and detect the disease at an early stage. Currently, mammography is the only FDA\* approved exam to *screen* for breast cancer in asymptomatic women (women who have no symptoms of breast cancer). To help detect breast cancer, women aged forty years and older should have regular mammograms, once every two years, in addition to a yearly clinical breast exam (CBE) and a monthly self breast exam (SBE). Women between the ages of 20 and 40 do not typically need screening mammograms unless they are at high risk (i.e. a strong

family history of breast cancer).

However, women 20-40 years of age should practice monthly self breast exams and receive clinical breast exams at least once every three years.

#### Ok, so what is a clinical breast exam (CBE) and what is a self breast exam (SBE)?

Clinical breast exams are performed by your doctor during regular check ups. During the exam, the doctor will look for breast changes such as size, shape or color. Then she/he will feel the entire breast and underarm areas for any new lumps or changes.

You should get into the habit of performing self breast exams once a month just as your period ends. If you no longer menstruate, then perform SBE on the same day of each month. Women should perform monthly SBEs starting in their adolescent years.

#### Can you explain the risk factors of breast cancer?

There are a number of risk factors that are linked to breast cancer; some of which you can control and others that you cannot change. The most important risk factors are age and family history. Other risk factors include alcohol consumption, being overweight after menopause or gaining weight as an adult, having a first child after age 35, never having children, currently or recently using some form of hormone replacement therapy (HRT) for menopause. Having one or more risk factor for breast cancer does *not* mean that you will get breast cancer. It means that your chances of developing breast cancer are higher than women who have fewer risk factors. However, many women with breast cancer do not have any known risk factors aside from being female. The best way to protect yourself against breast cancer is by maintaining routine checkups. The best course of action will depend on your age and your risk factors, so talk to your doctor about any risk factors that you may have. ■