

October is

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While the weather may not suggest it, fall has officially arrived and for many of us that means preparing for the holidays is at the top of our priority list. While Halloween is just around the corner, October isn't just about scary costumes and candy. It is also National Breast Cancer Awareness Month, so let's take just a moment to review why this deserves our attention.

Breast cancer is the second leading cause of cancer death among women causing more than 40,000 deaths annually. One in 8 women in the United States will be diagnosed with breast cancer in their lifetime with 281,550 invasive breast cancer diagnoses expected in the U.S. in 2021. While people most think of breast cancer as a disease that only affects women, 2,650 men are also expected to be diagnosed with breast cancer this year. So now that we know how common this problem is, what do we watch for and how do we screen for it?

What are the risk factors for breast cancer?

Approximately 5 to 10% of breast cancers are attributed to inherited gene mutations coming from either the mother or father. BRCA1 and BRCA2 mutations are the most common. Patients with one of these known inherited genetic mutations are at substantially increased risk for breast cancer, in the case of BRCA, this risk can be as high as 75% in one's lifetime. Outside of families with known gene mutations, a woman with a first degree relative with breast cancer (mother, sister, daughter) has a nearly doubled lifetime risk of the disease. This scenario however applies to less than 15% of women diagnosed with breast cancer. In the majority of women with a breast cancer diagnosis (approximately 85%), there is no family history of breast cancer so patients need to be aware of other associated risks. These include, age, prior radiation to the chest before age 30, being overweight or obese, not having a full-term pregnancy or having a first child after age 30, starting menses prior to age 12 or menopause after age 50, drinking alcohol and lack of exercise. Breastfeeding has been associated with decreased breast cancer risk, especially if done for longer than one year.

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swelling of all or part of the breast, skin dimpling or nipple retraction, scaliness or thickening of the skin or nipple, a lump in the breast or underarm or breast pain. If you are experiencing any of these symptoms, please speak with your physician.

Many women may have skipped their annual mammogram due to the COVID-19 pandemic and