

Never A DULL Moment



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Have you ever heard... breast cancer doesn't hurt? You have to have a lump to have breast cancer? It's National Breast Cancer Awareness Month, and I thought this would be a good opportunity to share information on the type of breast cancer I have, Inflammatory Breast Cancer (IBC).

Most have not heard of this type of breast cancer which has also been called "The Silent Killer." Inflammatory breast cancer is a rare, highly infective (advanced and accelerated) form of breast cancer. It represents a very low percentage (roughly 6 percent) of all breast cancers, but 25 percent of all breast cancer deaths are attributed to it. This type of cancer is usually not detected by mammograms or ultrasounds but is best caught with an MRI or biopsy. Pain is also present in approximately half of patients.

IBC requires immediate aggressive treatment with chemotherapy prior to surgery and is treated differently than more common types of breast cancer.

We have been taught and are reminded frequently by public service announcements and by the medical field that when a woman discovers a lump on her breast she should go to the doctor immediately. IBC, unfortunately, does not always have a lump. Some women who have IBC may remain undi-

agnosed for long periods, even while seeing their doctor to learn the cause of their symptoms. This is exactly the situation I was in.

Symptoms are similar to mastitis, a breast infection. Some doctors – mine included – do not recognize IBC and will prescribe antibiotics. In my case, I had been intending to get a mammogram, and these symptoms reminded me to make that request to my doctor. Due to my "young" age of 35, my doctor suggested that I wait until age 40. Because I was adamant about receiving a base-line for future reference, he agreed to schedule my appointment.

I feel blessed to have had a lump. Without it, the mammogram would not necessarily have shown IBC. Without a lump, the prescribed antibiotics would have covered the symptoms, possibly for months, until either someone made the correct diagnosis or a biopsy was taken.

The National Cancer Institute defines IBC as a type of breast cancer in which the breast looks red and swollen and feels warm. The skin of the breast may also show the pitted appearance called *peau d'orange* (like the skin of an orange). The redness and warmth occur because the cancer cells block the lymph vessels in the skin. The National Cancer Institute, NCI, describes the symptoms of inflammatory breast cancer as:

- A lump or thickening in or near the breast or in the underarm area.

- A change in the size or shape of the breast.

- Nipple discharge or tenderness, or the nipple pulled back (inversion) into the breast.

- Ridges or pitting of the breast (the skin looks like the skin of an orange).

- A change in the way the skin of the breast, areola, or nipple looks or feels (for example, warm, swollen, red, or scaly).

- Persistent itching of breast or nipple.

I stand on my soapbox to implore women, regardless of age, to pay attention to their bodies. Speaking from experience, I know it is important to find a doctor that you trust and who listens to you.

I love the medical field because I grew up surrounded by it. My mom is an oncologist's nurse. On the other hand, I have dealt with some questionable bedside manners and diagnostic errors. Getting a second opinion about a diagnosis or being direct with a discourteous medical practitioner should always be considered.

I hope my research and thoughts regarding this rare disease are informative and eye-opening. The information should not be used for diagnostic or treatment purposes, because it is not considered complete or exhaus-

ive.

First consult with your physician or other health care provider. My surgeon suggested these Web sites: <http://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/> and <http://www.cancer.org/>. I believe that with more awareness of this silent killing disease, many women will be less likely to be misdiagnosed.

I had many of the classic symptoms of IBC and thought it foolish to be seen by a physician just for a small rash – a rash that didn't grow, but never stopped itching for multiple weeks (I lost count).

But seriously, who goes to the doctor for a rash on your breast? Had I been more aware of the symptoms of IBC, I am positive that I would have been in to see my family doctor sooner and argued my thoughts. I can honestly say that I would rather have had a small skin graft or biopsy, than have the amount of time lapse that did. It would have been worth it even if the results were negative.

In my heart, I know that the Lord is in control and this has all happened to me for a reason. I may never know that reason, but in sharing my experiences and thoughts, I hope to help others who might be in similar situations.

Consider the message – National Breast Cancer Awareness Month – and be proactive by scheduling your regular medical check-up.