

# Indian women at higher risk of developing breast cancer

## VIBE REPORTER

AN Indian woman has a 1/13 chance of developing breast cancer and is at significantly greater risk of the disease than her white or black counterparts, whose risk is 1/16 and 1/57 respectively, says Dr Anil Bramdev, a pathologist and member of the National Pathology Group.

"Our KwaZulu-Natal practice sees a disproportionate number of Indian breast cancer patients. On average, we are diagnosing two cases a day," Bramdev says, adding that many of the cancers were familial; the disease is passed genetically from generation to generation.

"Most familial breast cancer is the result of a mutation of the BRCA 1 and 2 genes. In 80% of families with a history of four or more cases of breast cancer, either BRCA1 or BRCA 2 is responsible," he says.

Individuals with a mutation of the BRCA 1 gene also carry a 40% risk of contracting ovarian cancer by 70. Carriers of the BRCA 2 gene have a lower incidence of ovarian cancer but their families do have a higher rate of male cancer.

Of particular concern to Bramdev is the large increase in the number of younger patients (under age 40) who are contracting breast cancer. The standard procedure for screening for breast cancer is regular physical examinations, followed by an annual mammogram from age 40 and gene testing if there is a query.

However, he said that a normal mammogram can miss up to one third of lesions so in cases where there is a strong family history of breast cancer, it is important to do genetic testing as soon as possible, even when a woman is in her early twenties.

Early detection is critical to successful treatment. If breast cancer is detected in stage one, when it is confined to the breast, there is an excellent prognosis for the patient as the cure success rate is 90%. At this stage, it is still possible to remove the cancer with a wide incision and no chemotherapy may be necessary.

In stage two the cancer spreads to the lymph nodes under the armpit. Both surgery and chemotherapy are needed to treat the patient and the prognosis drops to 50%. During stage 3, the cancer spreads to neck and other side of the chest, and in stage four, it spreads to the other organs, making recovery unlikely.

Another important test that determines behaviour and prognosis in breast cancer is HER2 test, also known as c-erb. HER2, the Human Epidermal growth factor Receptor 2, is a protein