

Indian women at higher risk of developing breast cancer

An Indian woman has a 1/13 chance of developing breast cancer and is thus at significantly greater risk to the disease than her white or black counterparts, whose risk is 1/16 and 1/57 respectively.

This is according to Dr Anil Bramdev, a pathologist and member of the National Pathology Group (NPG) practising in Durban.

"Our KwaZulu Natal practice sees a disproportionate number of Indian breast cancer patients. On average, we are diagnosing two cases a day," Dr Bramdev said, adding that many of the cancers were familial; and 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 BRCA 1 or BRCA 2 is responsible," he said.

Individuals with a mutation of the BRCA 1 gene also carry a 40% risk of contracting ovarian cancer by the age of 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 Dr Bramdev is the large increase in the number of younger patients (under the age of 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 is a query.

However, Dr Bramdev 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.

"Unfortunately, if your mother and elder sister or an aunt developed breast cancer, you are a very high risk to get the disease as well. For your long term well being, it is critical to detect the disease as early as possible," Dr Bramdev said.

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 is 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