Do men get breast cancer, too?

Recently, an elderly friend of mine asked if I would take a look at his left breast. He had noticed a slight soreness near the nipple several weeks earlier but had put off doing anything about it.

“Do men actually get breast cancer, too,” he asked.


So he pulled up his tee shirt, and I took a look.

Sure enough, I felt a small pea-sized lump near his left nipple. His right breast felt normal.

“This may be serious,” I said. “You need to make an appointment with your doctor right away and get this checked. Hopefully it’s just a cyst. But you need a diagnosis. Okay?”

“Thanks,” he replied.

Then he pulled out his cell phone, called his doctor’s office and got an appointment for the next day.
Do men get breast cancer, too?

Each year in the United States, about 2,000 men get breast cancer and about 400 die from the disease. In comparison, more than 200,000 women get breast cancer and more than 40,000 die from the disease.

Male breast cancer is most common in older men, though it can occur at any age.

Many men delay seeing their doctor if they notice something unusual, such as a breast lump. For this reason, male breast cancers are often diagnosed when the disease is more advanced.

Signs and symptoms of male breast cancer can include:

- A painless lump or thickening in your breast tissue
- Changes to the skin covering your breast, such as dimpling, puckering, redness or scaling
- Changes to your nipple, such as redness or scaling, or a nipple that begins to turn inward
- Discharge from your nipple.

You should make an appointment with your doctor if you have any of these signs or symptoms.

Everyone is born with a small amount of breast tissue. Breast tissue consists of milk-producing glands (lobules), ducts that carry milk to the nipples and fat.
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During puberty, women begin developing more breast tissue, and men do not. But because men are born with a small amount of breast tissue, they can still develop breast cancer.

The types of breast cancer diagnosed in men include:

- Cancer that begins in the milk ducts (ductal carcinoma). Nearly all male breast cancer is ductal carcinoma.
- Cancer that begins in the milk-producing glands (lobular carcinoma). This type is rare in men because they have few lobules in their breast tissue.
- Cancer that spreads to the nipple (Paget’s disease of the nipple). Rarely, male breast cancer forms in the milk ducts and spreads to the nipple.

Some men inherit abnormal (mutated) genes from their parents that increase the risk of breast cancer. Mutations in one of several genes, especially a gene called BRCA2, put men at greater risk of developing breast, prostate and colon cancers.

These genes normally make proteins that keep cells from growing abnormally, which helps prevent cancer. But mutated genes aren’t as effective at protecting you from cancer.

Other factors that increase the risk of male breast cancer include older age, the peak incidence being between the ages of 68 and 71, a family history of breast cancer and exposure to estrogen-containing drugs.
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Your doctor may conduct a number of diagnostic tests, such as a clinical breast exam, a mammogram or ultrasound, and a needle biopsy.

Fortunately, a biopsy of my friend’s breast lump revealed a benign cyst. What a relief!

A further thought: Next week we’ll hear from Cote De Pablo, former star of NCIS and current spokesperson for the CDC’s “Inside Knowledge” campaign to raise awareness of the five main types of gynecologic cancer.

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