

Up Front with Breast Health: Maximizing Life and Minimizing Cancer Risk in a Stressful World

Let's face it! Breast cancer is one of the biggest health fears of women. The good news is that breast cancer is largely caused by lifestyle and your risk can be at least minimized, if not avoided. Even though we are exposed to hazardous environmental toxins and some women have genetic predisposition to breast cancer, stress management and improving chest tissue health may be your key to life and health.

Today's demanding lifestyle negatively impacts our health. Our body responds to excessive stress with physical discomforts, vulnerability to disease and retained tension within the tissues (both emotional and physical). Pain, impaired function and compromised cellular microenvironment are manifestations of stress. Connective tissue fibers retain stress and form tight, hard and dry lumps or knots often found throughout muscles. Women often develop these fascial restrictions in their neck, chest, abdominal and pelvic areas. Hormones, impaired circulation and daily doses of tension often aggravate tight tissue in the chest and pelvic areas of women. Daily pressure and stress often create upper body problems and emotional stress may be stored in the abdomen, pelvis and breast areas.

Cellular Health and Circulation. Proper circulation deep within the tissues is necessary for health, function and protection from diseases, such as cancer. Lumps or knots represent very dense tissue that limits natural hydration, nutrition, oxygenation and cleansing at the cellular level. Releasing tight and dense tissue fibers improves circulation for natural health, healing and disease protection. Stress management and improving tissue health in the chest is important to a healthy life and pain-free activity.

Forward Culture. Our stressful and driven world causes many to suffer from back, shoulder, neck and headache pains. Driving, computer work, housework, deskwork, childcare and texting are common forward activities today. Much of our time is spent with our head, neck and shoulders in a forward position, causing strain on the backside of our upper body. Working with our arms and shoulders in the forward position strains the shoulder blades and supporting muscles across our upper back. We are driven with daily pressure to complete these activities and the shoulders become tense and pulled upward. Strained muscles from our shoulders and back pull up the neck, already tense as it attempts to stabilize the head that is hanging out in front of the torso. Forces on the neck greatly increase in this forward posture, causing strain from the upper back through the shoulders and neck into the head. Life pressures and stress contribute to headaches. The added physical strain on the backside pulls up the neck and into the head, contributing to head discomforts. Have you considered the possibility that these complaints on the back of our upper body may be caused by restrictions on the FRONT side?

Increased Stress for Women. This forward syndrome intensifies in women with increased pressures at home and work along with the weight of breasts, limitations of their chests with a bra and hormonal impact on anterior chest tissue. Persons with low self-esteem or lack of confidence tend to hunch their shoulders forward, possibly in an effort to “hide.” All of these factors can exacerbate the structural forward posture tendencies in women, with the negative impact on their health and function.

Developmental Insecurities. Young women who were uncomfortable with their breast development during puberty may have subconsciously acquired this forward posture. Their development may be sooner or later than expected, larger or smaller than anticipated or there may be other emotional anxiety connected with their chest. As women have sexual thoughts, feelings and experiences, the breasts can become a focal point of tension and anxiety, with retained stress and trauma in the fascia. These unique tendencies with many women further challenge their structure, function and health.

Improving Circulation and Tissue Health. Treating restricted tissue on the front of the shoulders and chest will greatly assist relieving pain and tension of the back, neck and head as well as improve tissue health. Restricted tissues may be tender or non-painful, cyclical or chronic and can be found on the anterior chest of most women. Tender or non-tender lumps or “knots” are usually benign and are commonly found near the shoulder, by the sternum, along the lower perimeter of the breast or within the breast gland. Self-massage will increase circulation and natural cleansing of the chest. A trained therapist can provide deeper treatment of restricted tissues for pain relief, improved movement, enhanced lymphatic drainage and even augmented lung capacity.

Stress Management. We all know that stress is harmful to health. Studies indicate that stress correlates with psychological and health outcomes, and it also predicts negative health conditions. As described above, physical and emotional stress is stored within connective tissue fibers constricting and restricting tissue, which impairs function, causes pain and compromises tissue health. Our challenge is to effectively manage our stress and treat the effects on the body already compromised by stress.

Connection Between Stress and Cancer. Stress has received substantial consideration as a correlate and predictor of psychological and health outcomes. Biobehavioral factors have long been thought to affect many health processes, including cancer. The relationship between inflammation of stress and cancer is now recognized as a facilitating characteristic of cancer. A substantial amount of research connects neuroendocrine regulatory function of physiologic pathways with growth and progression of cancer. However, there is not conclusive research establishing evidence-based pathways between behavioral risk factors and cancer initiation.

Myofascial Release May Be Anticancer. Stress and the sympathetic nervous system seem to change tissue microenvironment and a “switch” triggers cancer cell proliferation. This phenomenon has been specifically linked to breast cancer. Fascial research also shows a change in the microenvironment within tissue and this may be related to impaired circulation and decreased intracellular communication within the fascia. A recent study

(December 2012) shows that breast cancer cells revert to normal cells under pressure. This may explain how Myofascial Release opens restricted fascial tissue by releasing tension, improving tissue circulation that allows normal nutrition, hydration and cleansing at the cellular level. Myofascial Release also releases interleukin-8, an anticancer chemical produced by macrophages (white blood cells that engulf and destroy cancer cells.)

Treating Upper Body Complaints. Headaches, neck, shoulder and upper back pain are common in our forward stressful lifestyle. Tense contracted anterior chest muscles and stress contribute to complaints. There are self-care postural adjustments and stretches that can minimize the negative effects on the body. Skilled bodywork can correct tight anterior chest muscles (and tissues) that will improve function and breathing, as well as decrease neck, shoulder, back and head pain.

Women can improve the health and function of their body by self-care and massage of their chest. They can also become experts on changes in their own breasts. Early detection of breast malignancy results in more successful and less invasive therapy. There has been low compliance with women doing BSE (Breast Self-Exam) and this may be related to poor education and the emphasis on “finding something,” which is very scary. When the emphasis is on breast health, there may be a higher level of compliance and a resultant positive impact on pain relief, function and overall health.

Attached is a handout from a breast specialist for breast self-massage called the PHAST technique. This is a simple, creative and effective approach for women to treat their chest daily and detect any changes. This will increase circulation within the tissues and the lymphatic system as well as reduce fascial restrictions within constricted muscles and fascia of the anterior chest.

Tight bras impair chest circulation and lymphatic drainage. Studies show that 80% of women wear the wrong bra size and many women purchase bras for cosmetic appearance instead of support, comfort and chest health. There are also studies implicating tight bras and prolonged bra wear with breast cancer. Decreased circulation and lymphatic drainage (from tight bras) suppress the immune system and impair normal drainage of the breasts and chest tissues. Proper bra sizing, along with breast self-care may be very effective in health and well-being.

Finding an experienced women’s health therapist can be invaluable for assisting you to holistic treatment for everyday aches and pains as well as achieving an optimal level of health. In addition to treatment of important issues, you can receive guidance on daily self-care for ongoing health and wellness.

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