

Don't Let it Happen to You – Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month

Stop what you are doing! Oh, OK, if you're reading this column, you can do that obviously. But this one needs your full attention. This is for everyone: you, your sisters, mothers, daughters, even you guys. Yes you! You need to read it too.

September is Ovarian Cancer Awareness month and this is deadly serious – no pun intended. We all have a responsibility to turn this disease from the “Silent Killer” that it is, into a “Known Threat.”

Do you think that ovarian cancer only strikes women over 60? Especially those who are childless? So did I 3 years ago. But the fact remains that whilst the median age for this disease is 63, some 32% of women under 55, many pre-menopausal, will succumb to the disease.

Do you think that there is no link between breast cancer and ovarian cancer? So did I. My mother had breast cancer, but I had no idea that it could put me at increased risk for ovarian cancer too.

That lack of knowledge, and ignoring what my body was, very subtly, trying to tell me, caused me to go from a clean bill of health in March of '06 to advanced stage ovarian cancer in November of that year. Now, nearly 3 years on, after an eight hour operation, two, six month, rounds of chemotherapy and 2 clinical drug trials, I am in remission. But as you will see, the story doesn't end here.

Every women needs to know the warning signs and how to take action.

Your lifetime risk for ovarian cancer is 1 in 72. Doesn't sound very much does it? Especially given that your risk for breast cancer is 1 in 8. However, think of it this way. In a town the size of Los Alamos, around 125 women will get ovarian cancer in their lifetime. There are, to my knowledge, currently 4 women battling late stage ovarian cancer here. Well, four's not much I hear you say. Well what if I told you that:

The average 5 year survival rate is 46%.

For breast cancer its 89%; for cervical cancer its 72%. But its still only 4 women, right? OK, let me put it another way. Ovarian cancer has a lower survival rate than any other cancer specific to women. For those diagnosed with advanced stage ovarian cancer, more than 80% will die from it within 5 years. One of those women could be someone you love. Imagine your life without them. Imagine your children's lives without them. That's why you need to know how to catch it early.

In the 19% of women whose cancer is caught at Stage 1:

The 5 year survival rate can be as high as 92%.

It's a totally treatable, even curable, disease if caught early, before it spreads outside the ovaries. So why are women dying of this disease all over America? Because people like you, and sometimes your physician, aren't knowledgeable enough about its often vague symptoms and don't consider it a possibility. Some women can spend months, even years, being passed from one doctor to another before they get diagnosed. Gilda Radner died for that same reason in 1989. Unfortunately, it still happens today.

So what are these symptoms? And why are they so difficult to diagnose? They are:

Bloating, pelvic or abdominal pain, feeling full quickly, changes in bowel movements, a frequent or urgent need to urinate. Other, even vaguer, symptoms can include gas, fatigue and cycle irregularity (hard to spot for peri- or menopausal women).

Which one of us, ladies, doesn't have some of these each month? It could be anything right? A dodgy meal, time of the month, just getting older. But if you have any of these for more than a couple of weeks and they are new or quite different from your usual state of health, go see your physician or gynecologist. If you think it could be ovarian cancer, insist, yes I said INSIST, on a CA-125 blood test (the cancer marker for this disease), and an ultrasound. If you still think it could be ovarian cancer, and don't feel you're being taken seriously, ask to be referred to a Gynecological Oncologist (GO), who can rule it out definitively.

In the six months before I was diagnosed, with Stage III ovarian cancer, I had 3 of the symptoms above. My CA-125 went from 17 in March to 4600 in November. If I'd gone to the doctors earlier, would the disease have been caught earlier? Yes. Did that few months delay have a profound affect on my chance of getting to see my daughters grow up? Yes. Do I kick myself every single day that I didn't go earlier? Absolutely yes. And yes, all you psychologists out there, I am working on my anger issues.

That's why I want everyone to at least know it's a possibility. Will I make it my life's work to keep on at you until you get it? You bet ya! So cut this out and stick it on your wall, give it to a friend; go to my website and download the factsheet; email that to all your friends.

Cancer changed my life beyond all measure. At 39, I was the healthiest, most active kid on the block. Never been in hospital, never needed a doctor. Me? Cancer? No way.

It happened to me. Don't let it happen to you.

Kay Kerbyson is founder and President of Ovarian Cancer Together!, a website based non-profit networking and education charity. More information about Ovarian Cancer can be found at www.OvarianCancerTogether.org or you can email Kay questions at Kay@ovariancancertogether.org