

To have breasts is to be a woman. They are what separate us physically from men, feed our babies, provide our sexual pleasure and, so often, boost our self-esteem. The dual significance of breasts as both sensual and functional can be traced back to Biblical times when King Solomon refers to his beloved's breasts as 'Twin fawns of a gazelle that gazes among the lilies'. Today, young girls are given no choice but to be aware of the significance of their breasts as they confront a media fusillade of images of women with curves where it counts. What happens, then, in a society so preoccupied with boobs, when yours are cancerous?

Statistics released in June by the Cancer Association of South Africa (CANSA) show that breast cancer is second only to lung cancer in causing cancer deaths among South African women. But, says Dr Elizabeth

Murray, a Cape Town-based oncologist and breast-cancer specialist, diagnosis does not mean death. The key to surviving breast cancer is early detection and treatment. As breast tumours increase in size, the likelihood of the cancer having spread increases too.

For this reason Linda Greeff, a social worker in Port Elizabeth who works with cancer patients, insists that women take matters into their own hands...

literally. 'All women have different breast tissue, which is why it's vital to become familiar with your own breasts by conducting monthly self examinations. This way, you'll pick up irregularities early.'

Most women discover breast cancer as a lump in the chest area, but Dr Murray warns that the disease can manifest in other ways. 'Cancer can look like inflammation or eczema of the nipple or may present as a swelling of the breast. Be aware of nipple discharge, particularly if it's bloodstained.'

Sadly, a major barrier to treatment of the disease in this country remains the myths and stigmas that surround it. Many women believe breast cancer only occurs in older women, or those with a family history of the disease, but this is not

always the case. Nasrene Hoosen, 38, was shocked when she was diagnosed despite not having a family history. And while your risk of getting breast cancer does increase with age, the disease is not limited to more mature women, as 18-year-old Jenna Skews from Glenvista, Joburg, discovered

when she was diagnosed in matric. 'My first reaction was, "Seriously? I'm only 17!"' Jenna underwent a mastectomy while preparing for her matric dance and final exams.

Another common myth, says Greeff, is that breast cancer is a 'western disease'. In South Africa, a lack of resources and education in rural

communities means that women are not always effectively diagnosed, nor quickly, or even correctly, treated. Forty-two-year-old Lorraine Leburu, recalls how, when she was diagnosed two years ago, relatives thought she was 'bewitched'.

Many women also wrongly believe the inevitable consequence of discovering the disease is the loss of your breasts. 'Each strain of the cancer has its own personality and treatments are devised with this in mind,' says Dr Murray, who does, nonetheless, point out that surgery is the most common option. A lumpectomy, where part of the breast is removed, or a mastectomy, where the whole breast is removed, is often recommended, but other treatments include hormone therapy and biopic therapy (where the body's immune system is boosted to fight off the infection).

That said, breast cancer differs markedly from other cancers in that cheating death is not always the only battle needing to be fought. 'Losing one's breasts can have a devastating emotional effect as it's so often tied to notions of femininity and sexuality,' explains Catriona Boffard, a Cape Town-based sex and relationship therapist. Upon hearing her diagnosis, breast cancer survivor Nkele Thamae, 38, wondered 'Will my physical appearance change? Will my husband still find me attractive?' Lorraine recalls how her confidence took a nosedive after her mastectomy: 'I felt

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ME MY BREASTS AND I

*In honour of Breast Cancer
Awareness Month,*

MICHELLE HATTINGH

*busts some of the most common
myths about a disease that
affects one in 29 South
African women*

MY FIRST MAMMOGRAM

Newly 40, ELLE National Advertising Sales Manager, Charlotte Nutman describes a milestone moment in her journey to good health

Turning 40 is a big deal. You begin to appreciate the importance of a healthy body, and an annual mammogram is a crucial step in maintaining this good health.

I'm nervous as I arrive at the Arya Stana Bone & Breast Care Clinic in Constantia, Cape Town, but I am instantly put at ease – it feels more like a day spa than a medical facility.

After filling in the questionnaire, I meet radiographers Ulandi Horn and Dr Sumi Padayachee, who escort me to the X-ray room and explain the procedure. Three-dimensional images of both my breasts from the front and side are taken. Each breast is flattened to show all areas of the tissue – the whole process is quick and only mildly uncomfortable.

After the mammogram Dr Padayachee conducts an ultrasound. There's a small cyst on my left breast she wants to take a closer look at. Fortunately there's nothing to worry about, but had this not been the case, she would have conducted a biopsy immediately.

After dressing, I was given copies of my scan for my own records and Dr Padayachee explained the importance of an annual mammogram, which she says can pick up the most miniscule irregularity up to two years before an actual lump is felt.

All in all, the visit was a lot less daunting than I had anticipated and, for the sake of my health, well worth an hour of my time.'

I was no longer complete.' Young Jenna describes how she too 'lost a sense of my womanhood, before I even had a chance to know what being a woman felt like.'

What's more, if the type of cancer is hormone-dependent, the prescribed medication decreases the body's oestrogen levels, which can push the patient into early menopause. Eldre Strydom from Yzerfontein was 31 when she was prescribed this treatment: 'As a result, I couldn't fall pregnant, which was devastating.'

Because it strikes at the very heart of a woman's identity as a feminine being, a redefinition of identity is frequently one of the biggest psychological struggles that breast cancer sufferers face. But it can be done. Loraine Joubert, 39, describes how her battle with the disease has brought out her 'inner cancer-survivor diva' thanks to the wigs and funky hats that have become part of her daily grooming routine. Cynthia Meyer, 62, describes leaving the house with her bald head uncovered as an act of rebellion. Nthabiseng Motaung, a 34-year-old survivor, sees her scars as a badge of courage, a reminder of what she has endured. 'I might be bald, but that doesn't make me less of a woman,' she adds. Counselling and a supportive network are also helpful coping mechanisms, but none so much as owning one's recovery or, as Greeff calls it, becoming 'patient active': 'It is most often the patients who take control of their own mental, emotional and physical wellbeing, that pull through the strongest.'

No one wants to get breast cancer and, sure, a healthy lifestyle, an awareness of your risk factors and regular examinations are all good practices to avoid it, but those who make it through the disease often speak of the fresh perspective on life it's ultimately given them. Despite her prognosis, Eldre is now a mom to a healthy baby boy. Nkele entered the Mrs United Nations South Africa 2013/2014 event and

'Those who make it through the DISEASE speak of the fresh perspective on LIFE it's ultimately given them'

was selected as one of the 17 national finalists. For Jenna, surviving helped her make decisions about her future career: 'I know now I could never be in a job where I don't make a real difference in the lives of others.' □