

Breast cancer study links reducing risk to lifestyle

Details revealed at Marin forum

By Richard Halstead
IJ reporter

Women in Marin could substantially reduce their risk of getting breast cancer by making changes in their lifestyle, according to the results of a study unveiled yesterday during a breast cancer research symposium hosted by the county of Marin at the Civic Center.

Women who give birth to their first child after age 29, or choose not to have a child, account for about a third of all breast cancer cases in Marin, said Christine

Erdmann, an associate professor of epidemiology at the University of Michigan, who conducted the study. Erdmann used data collected from a telephone survey of 55,000 California households in 2001.

She reported that 78 percent of the women in Marin between the ages of 31 and 50 gave birth after age 29, or had no children.

Erdmann also looked at five other risk factors: the age at which women with breast cancer began menstruating, whether there was a family history of breast cancer, if they were postmenopausal and overweight, whether they consumed alcohol,

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and if they used hormone replacement therapy.

If all six of the risk factors could be avoided, Marin women would reduce their chance of getting breast cancer by 50 percent, Erdmann said. Of course, several of the factors, such as family history and age of menstruation, can't be changed.

"There is even some argument as to whether when a woman has her first child is modifiable," Erdmann said. "But there are a number of things that can be done."

By reducing alcohol intake, avoiding replacement hormones and keeping physically fit after menopause, women can reduce their chances of getting breast cancer by 10 percent, Erdmann said.

Erdmann was one of several scientists who presented the results of research that was coordinated by the county's Department of Health and Human Services and funded by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. The county of Marin has received more than \$1 million over the last four years from the state and federal government to fund breast cancer research, said Larry Meredith, director of the county's health department. Meredith said the county will

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soon embark on a \$500,000 project to collect saliva and blood samples from Marin women during breast cancer screenings. Dr. Chris Benz, director of the Buck Institute's Program for Cancer, said the samples will be used to search for a genetic trigger for breast cancer.

"We need to find out why it is that so many women are exposed to these same risk factors and don't end up getting breast cancer," Benz said.

Concern about breast cancer rates in Marin soared after a international study reported in 1994 that the Bay Area has the highest rate of breast cancer in the world. That was followed a year later with the news that breast cancer rates in Marin were the highest in the Bay Area. From 1997 to 2001, 1,307 Marin women

were diagnosed with breast cancer, or about 261 per year.

Last year, Marin women got some good news. The Northern California Cancer Center in Union City reported that breast cancer rates in Marin were not as high as first thought. The number of cases per 100,000 population based on white, non-Hispanic women was adjusted downward by 11 percent to 176.6 incidents per 100,000 population, from 198.5 reported in 2002.

County epidemiologist Rochelle Ereman said yesterday that the county has revised its estimates of breast cancer incidence and mortality in conjunction with the cancer center's estimates.

Based on the new data, the county believes that the incidence of breast cancer in white non-Hispanic women in Marin is similar to that in San Francisco, 6 percent higher than rates in other Bay Area counties, and 15 percent higher than rates in California overall. Mortality rates in this Marin population were not significantly different from rates in the rest of the Bay Area or California, Ereman said.

But Mark Powell, another county epidemiologist, presented the results of a study he did that show higher rates of breast cancer



U photo/Alan Dep

FORUM: Rochelle Ereman of the Marin County Epidemiology Program speaks yesterday at the Breast Cancer Research Symposium at the Civic Center in San Rafael. A study presented at the forum cited risk factors that it said could reduce a woman's chance of getting breast cancer by 50 percent if they could be avoided.

among Hispanic women in Marin. Powell said breast cancer rates in Hispanic women in Marin are nearly 51 percent higher than rates in Hispanic women in the rest of California. Powell said the size of his sample population was small but statistically significant.

The news that risk factors play such a large role in determining who gets breast cancer received a mixed reception from the more than 200 women who attended yesterday's forum.

"I guess I would have wished there were risk factors that were more easily modifiable — because

a lot of the risk factors mentioned are going to be complicated by societal factors, by women's choice," said Nan Moon of Petaluma, a Kaiser Permanente health educator.

Contact Richard Halstead via e-mail at rhalstead@marinij.com