

Decoding the risks of breast cancer

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NEWTON — Even with technological advances by the day, the cause of breast cancer is unknown, but the risk factors are not.

“The biggest risk for getting breast cancer is being a woman and getting older,” said Dr. Michelle O’Shea, of Summit Breast Care in Sparta.

O’Shea, along with seven other experts, spoke about the disease during a 90 minute forum at Project Self-Sufficiency on Oct. 17.

The forum, titled “Breast Health, Everything You Wanted to Know, but Were Afraid To Ask,” gave local women — and a handful of men — the opportunity to ask questions and learn about breast cancer.

In addition to O’Shea, the forum featured Dr. May Abdo-Matkiwsky, a medical oncologist; Dr. Kathy Lo, a radiation oncologist; and Kelly Zukswert, a registered nurse and nurse navigator.

Because there is no known cause for breast cancer, there are several things the panelists suggested to help

reduce one’s risk.

“Being in good shape,” said Abdo-Matkiwsky. “We know that cells hold estrogen and estrogen is linked to breast cancer. It also has good effects on your cardiovascular health as well.”

Other suggestions including not smoking and limiting yourself to one drink per night.

O’Shea said the main thing patients who are diagnosed with breast cancer say to her is that they have no family history of it.

“Between 67 to 75 percent have no family history,” she said.

O’Shea said that women often will ignore strange lumps on their breasts for the fear that if it is cancer, insurance won’t cover the costs of medical procedures, something she says is not true.

She pointed those present to the New Jersey Cancer Education and Early Detection program, which “provides comprehensive outreach, education and screening services for breast, cervical, colorectal and prostate cancers,”

according to its website.

“The CEED program has money to do those studies and for you to go to a surgeon’s office and get a biopsy done,” she said. “Someone with no insurance or part of the NJ CEED can apply for charity care at the hospital (Newton Medical Center) so I can operate on you.”

“All of our practitioners don’t want a woman to not treat a lump because she can’t afford it. That’s a disaster. We can avoid that,” she said.

All the panelists agreed, that one of the most important factors in combating breast cancer is getting examined.

“Self exams are very important,” Abdo-Matkiwsky said.

The American Cancer Society this week published new recommendations that annual mammograms should begin at age 45 instead of 40, and switch to every other year at 55.

However, O’Shea said on Saturday, “We have seen a 34 percent reduction in deaths for those that get tested yearly beginning at the age of 40.”

Tina Jacobs, the director community health Susan G. Komen North Jersey, said “Education is most important thing you can have for breast health.”

