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Every time I've changed Gynecologists, I filled out the dreaded medical history forms knowing the reaction my new doctor will have once she/he sees that both my grandmothers had breast cancer. "Do you examine your breasts often?" "You need to be very careful", "Here put your arms up and let me see" poke poke poke...

Though I am glad for their concern I must admit that it is scary to think that you are considered high risk for breast cancer. In June of this year, I turned 30 and I can't begin to tell you all the weird changes that have been happening to my body. Some are way too weird and personal to mention, but about a month ago I did find a strange mass in my left breast. Now this is not really unusual for me since I normally have quite lumpy breasts, especially as that time of the month gets closer. So I figured it was just my natural lumps just feeling a little extra lumpy and I didn't pay it much mind. Three weeks later however it was still there and even more pronounced. So, to ward off any possibilities that it was my imagination playing tricks on me I asked my mother if she felt anything and she did. I quickly made the appointment to see my gynecologist.

I decided not to become rippled with fear about what the possibilities of an unknown mass in my breast could mean, but my panicky personality got the best of me and at times and I would picture myself losing all my hair which I had been spending so much time and money taking care of, the possibility of not being able to have kids, and worst of all losing my breast which I quickly passified by picturing myself with fake boobs. Vein and shallow!...yes I know. I reprimanded myself for thinking such thoughts and focused on God and life and thinking positive. It may be nothing.

The day of my much anticipated appointment came. As I waited in the examination room for my doctor, I lay on the bed in my robe opened to the front and busied myself with texting and bbm'ing to keep my mind of the negative. Thirty minutes later my doctor walked in with chart in-hand and stated, "What borough do you live in?" I said Queens. She said, "For How long?" Took me a while to think. I was unprepared for those questions. I was expecting something more around "How long have you had the lump?", "Who else in your family has had breast cancer?", "Seen any strange oozing?"

Seeing the confused look on my face, my gynecologist explained that the reason why she asked was because women who have lived in Queens and Long Island all or most of their lives are twice as likely to get breast cancer than women in any other borough in New York City. I was shocked! "I wasn't aware of that at all" I said and told her that I had only been living in Queens for the past 2 years and spent most of my life in the Caribbean. She then began her examination of both my breasts, starting with the right and then the left. She quickly felt the mass as well as another somewhere in the center of my left breast. She had me feel it also and yes! certainly there was something there. Not quite a lump or ball per se but definitely something. She asked me if I drink caffeine. I replied in the affirmative and told her that I had at least one cup a day give and take a

few days here and there when I preferred tea. She told me that caffeine has been known to make the breasts lumpy. Again, I was shocked at that.

She also told me that taking 600 mg's of Vitamin E daily will also help prevent breast cancer. Another shocker! She also asked me if I wore wired bras. I told her "All the time" she then went on to say that I needed to get non-wired bras since the wired ones are known to put extra pressure on the glands of the breast and can lead to breast cancer also. Yet another shocker!

She never once mentioned or even brought up my grandparents, so I volunteered the information just in case she missed it. She then asked me at what age they were diagnosed. I wondered whether it mattered, point is they had it and that makes me high risk! I said one was diagnosed at 84 and another at around 60. She nonchalantly shrugged it off saying "OK they were both past menopausal age". I was like "ok", wondering if that now meant that I am no longer high risk. Talk about confused.

By the end of the examination she explained that though I am too young to have a mammogram because of the density of my breast, that she was scheduling one anyway along with a sonogram just to be on the safe side. My heart was beating as she wrote the referral, still nervous and overwhelmed from the confusing information I had just received as well as this pending mammogram which I had heard such horror stories about. Two days later I showed up for my "mamo" and "sono" and though the doctor said that the tests are never 100% percent accurate, I thank God that the results were negative and showed no abnormality.

Though I was relieved, I was still a bit confused and very concerned. Even if the less than perfect results are negative then why do I have a lump? could the test be wrong? and am I really at less of a risk for breast cancer because both my grandparents were diagnosed post menopausal? and do I really have to go buy an entire new collection of wireless bras and take 600 Mg's of Vitamin E? Clearly there were some mixed messages being sent here and we all know prevention is better than cure so it was time to get to the bottom of things. I therefore decided to do some research and here are some of my findings.

I don't know about you, but I always thought a lump in the breast was a sure and definitive sign of cancer. The September issue of Cosmopolitan however, featured a section on finding a lump in your breast and that breast cancer doesn't have to be the diagnosis. According to their source, Marisa Weiss, Breast oncologist and Founder of Breastcancer.org "boobs get lumpy all the time" and although breast cancer is uncommon in young women it is always good to be on the safe side and always check with your gynecologist. She pinpoints a few different types of lumps that can be found in the breast and what it could possibly mean. For instance, if it feels like a painless moveable sphere, it's probably a fibroadenoma which are firm growths common in women in their 20's and are perfectly harmless. If the lump(s) feel small and pebbly or knotty, it's most likely fibrocystic changes related to hormone changes in the body particularly around PMS. If the lump is spongy round or oval it could be a fluid-filled cyst formed when fluid is retained in the breast tissue and has to be drained by a procedure called needle aspiration. So for starters, we know that all lumps don't necessarily mean breast cancer especially if you're still in your child bearing years. Youth however, doesn't necessarily mean that you're not at risk for getting breast cancer either. The only way to be sure is to see your gynecologist.

The October issue of Shape Magazine really goes into dispelling some of the breast cancer myths

out there with a great article called "What You Don't Know About Breast Cancer Can Hurt You" by Karyn Repinski. The first myth is: You can't get breast cancer if it doesn't run in your family. Like Sr. Weiss said, anyone can get breast cancer. The true determinants are age, hormones, biopsy history and breast density as well as other factors. According to Repinski, the real danger is in having a false sense of security so always check with your doctor to be on the safe side. The second myth is: Breast cancer always appears as a lump. The truth is signs of breast cancer can come in many ways. For example, a change in the size of your breast like a dimpled area or puckered appearance to the skin, an itchy scaly area, nipple discharge, swelling or redness of the breast or an inverted nipple. The third myth is: antiperspirants and under wire bras cause breast cancer. According to Repinski, the National Cancer Institute has done several studies that shows no correlation between breast cancer and deodorants or under wire bras. Phew! isn't that that's a relief?!

Though Repinski has cleared up a few of the smokey areas I am still confused about the family history theory as well as whether daily intake of vitamins such as Vitamin E lowers one's risk. So we know anyone can get breast cancer, but do persons with a family history of women being diagnosed in the pre or post menopausal stage make a difference in your chances of being diagnosed as well? To answer this question I took to the internet. According to Cancer.org "breast cancer risk is higher among women whose close blood relatives have the disease." If your mother, sister or daughter has been diagnosed, you are twice as likely to be at risk. If two of your close relatives have been diagnosed your risk is essentially tripled! Now interestingly enough, less than 15% of women with breast cancer have a family member(s) who was diagnosed which means that 85% of women who do get breast cancer actually have no family history of the disease. According to Breasthealthlink.com, a person with a familial history of breast cancer is one who has:

- A relative who has had breast cancer in both breasts
- A relative who was diagnosed with breast cancer before the age of 40
- A relative who has had both breast cancer and ovarian cancer
- A male relative who has or has had breast cancer

Familial factors that affect your risk are:

- The number of relatives with breast cancer
- The age at which their breast cancer is diagnosed.
- The number of first degree relatives with breast cancer

The next step in this myth debunking research is determining whether an intake of 600 Mg's of Vitamin E will really help prevent breast cancer. In regards to diet and vitamin intake, The American Cancer Society suggests eating a healthy diet focused on plant sources such as fruits, vegetables and whole grain and limiting consumption of processed foods and red meats. According to Cancer.org however, studies on the effects of vitamin intake such as Vitamin E on breast cancer are conflicting and inconclusive. The University of Maryland Medical Center states that Vitamin E's antioxidant abilities help to destroy free radicals which can damage bodily cells and DNA. The UMMC Study shows that women diagnosed with breast cancer show low levels of vitamin E in the body. Based on this observation, researchers have felt that vitamin E intake would help prevent breast cancer. However, studies have not been able to prove that intake of vitamins does in fact reduce one's risk.

Though I am more at ease about the myths and truths about breast cancer, I realize that risk factors vary greatly and can range from gender, to age as well as family history, race and ethnicity. Though I didn't touch on this, your lifestyle is also a factor in your risk for breast cancer and includes: oral contraceptive use, hormone therapy, having children, breast feeding, alcohol use and even physical activity. In reality one can never really know definitively what are the causes of breast cancer or what our individual risks are. The important thing is to educate yourself about the disease so that you can look out for any possible warning signs. Know your body. If something feels strange or looks strange be sure to check with your doctor and always get a second, third or fourth opinion.

Based on the information I've learned I understand that I am at risk. Having two second degree relatives affected by the disease increases my awareness as well as my risk. My paternal grandmother was diagnosed in her early post menopausal 60's and succumbed to the disease because of her own lack of knowledge. My maternal grandmother on the other hand was a survivor and was diagnosed in her early 80's with both breast and ovarian cancer. My cousin was also diagnosed in her early 20's. I may not be able to prevent myself from getting breast cancer but I can surely help decrease my risk. Debunking the myths and finding the truths was the first step and puts a more realistic and controlled picture in my mind. Although my "sono" and "mamo" are normal I intend to go get a second opinion being that the lump in my breast is still very much there. I also intend to lower my risk by getting into a more strict exercise routine, as well as eating a more well balanced diet made up of at least 5 grams of servings or more of vegetables and fruits per day. I will not go out and buy a wardrobe of new bras, but I do intend to continue to take my vitamins daily, yes even the Vitamin E. I also plan to continue my routine at-home breast exams. If I were not doing that exam regularly I probably would never have discovered the lump and we all know prevention is better than cure.

Women (and men) need to be aware of this disease. The only way to increase your awareness is through knowledge. There are lots of information on the internet and in your local library and don't be afraid to ask your doctor all the relevant questions. Express your concerns and talk about your personal risk. According to the American Cancer Society, breast cancer is the most common form of cancer in American women, except for skin cancer. Almost a quarter of a million women will be diagnosed in 2011 alone and almost 40,000 will succumb to the disease. At this time, there are over 2.6 million breast cancer survivors in the United States alone including my grandmother. Thanks to the stellar care she received at the Queens Hospital Breast Service and early detection, she was able to survive both breast and ovarian cancer. Strong family support was also a factor. Sometimes the families of breast cancer victims are forgotten and overlooked, but they also play a very important role in the care and support that they provide to family members. Caring for a family member diagnosed with breast cancer can be extremely stressful. This breast cancer month take the time to learn more about the disease and participate in the fight for the cure.

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