

The Women's Health Research Program

Health Bulletin
August 2013

Pregnancy and breast cancer

What is the association between pregnancy and risk of breast cancer?

Lifetime risk of breast cancer is the chance that a woman will develop breast cancer at some point during her life. For Australia, this is currently estimated to be about 1 in 8. It is generally considered that women who have had children are at a lower lifetime risk of breast cancer than women who have not had children. However, even though pregnancy may reduce lifetime risk of breast cancer, what is often not understood is that in the short term, pregnancy increases the risk of breast cancer. Furthermore, the period of increased risk following pregnancy is relatively short (10-15 years) in a woman who has her first birth when she is young (<20 years of age) but the duration of the period of increased risk in a woman who has her first birth late (40 years of age) may extend for 30-50 years or essentially the rest of her life.

Given that women are now tending to have their first baby later in life, the overall impact of pregnancy on lifetime risk of breast cancer may change.

Gestational breast cancer

Gestational breast cancer or pregnancy-associated breast cancer is breast cancer diagnosed during or in the 12 months following a pregnancy.



Gestational breast cancer is rare but breast cancer amongst young women in general is relatively uncommon. Overall, gestational breast cancer makes an important contribution to all breast cancer in young women. In the BUPA Health Foundation Health and Wellbeing After Breast Cancer study of 1683 Victorian women with their first diagnosis of invasive breast cancer, although gestational breast cancer made up only 3.3% of all breast cancer

diagnosed in women aged <48 years of age, it made up 14.3% of breast cancer diagnosed in women aged <35 years.

- Most gestational breast cancer is diagnosed after, rather than during, pregnancy and it is almost always found by the woman herself, as women in the reproductive age group are not routinely invited for screening mammography.
- Of the 13 cases of gestational breast cancer in our study, 9 were diagnosed following a pregnancy. Four of the 13 were diagnosed during pregnancy and 2 of these had given birth to a baby just over 12 months earlier.
- Compared with young women with non-gestational breast cancer, there was a trend towards those with gestational breast cancer having a larger tumour with relatively unfavourable characteristics and to report a family history of breast cancer.

Pregnancy after breast cancer

Given the current trend for women to have their families later, it is not surprising that some women are diagnosed with breast cancer before they have completed their desired family size, or in some cases, even started their family. In our study, 1 in 5 women aged < 40 years at diagnosis who had ▶



MONASH University

M8Alliance

either no children or only one child at that time, went on to have a pregnancy following treatment for their breast cancer.

Messages

- Young women should be aware that breast cancer can present during and in the period following a pregnancy so that if they become aware of a change in their breasts at this time they should not delay consulting their doctor.
- The management of pregnancy is likely to become an increasingly common part of the long-term care of young women who have been treated for breast cancer.

Get involved in research

A New Approach to Treating Women Who Do Not Experience Orgasm

Most recently a novel approach has been developed to potentially treat women who fail to reach orgasm (anorgasmia). Researchers recognised that testosterone therapy not only improved sexual desire, but also resulted in increased vaginal blood flow and increased orgasm frequency. As a result the approach of using testosterone on an “as needs” basis is being studied in centres across Australia and North America, including the Women’s Health Research Program.

Our new study will assess whether the self-administration of a single dose of testosterone as an intra-nasal gel will result in ability to reach orgasm for women who have previously experienced orgasm but no longer do so.

To participate in this study women need to be aged between 18 and 65, be experiencing inability to reach orgasm, but have experienced orgasm in the past and be in a stable sexual relationship of at least 6 months duration.

The study is being conducted at our centre at the Alfred Centre in Melbourne as well as in Sydney, Perth and Adelaide. Women interested in participating in the trial should call 1800 998 055.

Women’s Health Research Program

Tel: 03 9903 0827

Fax: 03 9903 0828

Email: womens.health@monash.edu

Web: womenshealth.med.monash.edu