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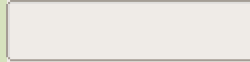
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NEWS

Saturday 30 September 2006

Ovarian cancer survivors speak out about silent killer

By: PostCrescent

Pat Horn and several of her friends want women to know about one of the most lethal female cancers: ovarian cancer.

"It used to be called the silent killer, but it whispers and women need to listen," said Horn of Appleton, who was diagnosed in April 2004.

Horn, who is now in remission following a grueling 10-month course of chemotherapy, considers herself fortunate. Three-fourths of ovarian cancer cases are detected only after tumors have spread beyond the ovaries, with less than half of its victims surviving five years after diagnosis.

"I was lucky," said Horn, whose tumors had spread to her intestines, spleen and diaphragm by the time she received her diagnosis, which was labeled stage three. "I'm blessed that I've been saved. I was told I had one to two years, and I made it to the two-year mark."

In recognition of ovarian cancer awareness month, Horn and several other survivors, who are part of a local support group, are eager to educate women about the deadliest of the female reproductive cancers.

"If we can get it detected earlier, we can save more women," Horn said. "If we can help even one woman get caught at an early stage that would be something, and that's what I'm determined to do."

Ovarian cancer accounts for about 4 percent of all women's cancers, but is the fourth-leading cause of cancer-related deaths among American women, according to the National Cancer Institute. Last year, an estimated 22,000 women were diagnosed with ovarian cancer, and more than 16,000 women died from the disease.

While a mammogram can detect breast cancer and a Pap smear cervical cancer, there is no screening test for ovarian cancer. Rather, there is a vague set of symptoms that can mimic other illnesses, contributing to the prevalent, late-stage diagnosis.

"My lower abdomen started bloating and I just thought it was that time of the month," said Horn, recalling her onset of symptoms. "But then it never went away."

The bloating progressed to abdominal pain, landing Horn in a local emergency room in the spring of 2004. The ER doctor sent her home with ulcer medication and a laxative.

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"I knew that wasn't the problem so I went to my family doctor who ordered a CT scan, and they found the tumors," she said.

In addition to bloating and abdominal or pelvic pain, other symptoms can include vague but persistent gastrointestinal upsets such as gas, nausea and indigestion. An urgent and/or frequent need to urinate can be another sign, as can unexplained changes in bowel movements. A change in weight and persistent and unusual fatigue are also potential symptoms.

"Women need to be so aware of their own bodies," said Kelli Zembruski, president of the Wisconsin Ovarian Cancer Alliance. "If a woman has these symptoms and they persist for a few weeks, go back to your doctor and be stern and say 'I need to know what's going on.'

"If your doctor doesn't listen, shop around for a new one. Ovarian cancer is misdiagnosed so often, which is why it ends up in the third or fourth stages."

After her diagnosis, Horn underwent a complete hysterectomy along with the removal of her appendix and some connective tissue between her stomach and abdominal organs.

She then received 18 weeks of traditional intravenous chemotherapy, followed by six months of "intraperitoneal therapy." Horn's oncologist pumped heavy doses of chemotherapy directly into her abdominal cavity. A study earlier this year in the New England Journal of Medicine found that the technique boosted survival by 16 months.

Survivor Jane Zima, too, had a complete hysterectomy followed by chemotherapy after her stage three diagnosis in 1999. Zima's regular blood tests for CA-125, a protein that is elevated in patients with ovarian cancer, remained normal for nearly five years.

Then at her five-year checkup, she got the bad news. Her CA-125 level was up; the cancer had returned. She had surgery in January 2005 to remove an egg-sized tumor in her abdomen, followed by seven months of chemotherapy.

Zima now gets her blood checked every month. So far, so good.

"I have a picture on my refrigerator that was taken in '03," said Zima of Darboy. "There are six of us there and there are only two of us still alive, and I say, boy are we lucky."

The support group helps in so many ways, said Zima, from offering emotional support to tips on how to deal with the metallic taste caused by chemo, for example. It also offers friendship and hope.

"I've met some wonderful women along this journey who I never would have met before," she said. "Sometimes a bad thing like cancer can bring good things into your life."

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