

## Lee County Health Department

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### BREAST CANCER AWARENESS, OCTOBER 2003

October is National Breast Cancer Awareness Month. This is probably not news to you, as the issue of breast cancer has received lots of media attention and publicity. I'm glad about that, because we need women to be aware that early detection saves lives. Although the number of women receiving regular mammograms is fairly high, it disheartens me to think of those women who don't take advantage of this potentially life-saving procedure. Women who don't receive regular breast cancer screenings are more likely to discover their cancer at an advanced stage, when it has more likely spread and is more difficult to treat.

According to data from the American Cancer Society, between the years of 1994-1998, there were 146 cases of breast cancer in Lee County residents. Data collected from 1997 through 2000 showed the percentage of Lee County women 40 and older who reported ever having had a mammogram was 80.5%. This is a bit below the state average of 85.7%. This figure doesn't speak to frequency of screenings, only ever having had a mammogram. Regularity of the procedure is important – having one doesn't mean you can wait another ten years for your next visit.

Think about all the things we do to increase our chances for survival –eating a healthful diet, wearing our seat belts, avoiding too much sun exposure, and on and on. Having a regular mammogram should be one of those routine parts of our lives. Many women have taken this step and get a mammogram each year. But – some women, for a variety of reasons, do not take this step.

Sometimes, as women, we take care of everyone but ourselves. Our lives are hectic, there are endless tasks to do each day to keep the household running and taking time to see the doctor for a preventive visit may not make the list. Sometimes we only go to the doctor AFTER we are sick. My argument to this is simple: if you want to be around longer to take care of those you love, take care of yourself. Get regular exams and screenings to prevent illness, or to detect problems early.

Some women tell me they are afraid of the mammogram procedure. Perhaps they have heard that a mammogram hurts. The truth is that some women breeze through a mammogram. Others may experience some discomfort. But – the discomfort lasts only a few moments and is much more preferable than the discomfort of cancer that has spread.

I have also heard women say that they don't want to know if there is a problem. Unfortunately, it doesn't work this way. Ignoring a possibility won't prevent it from happening. If you develop breast cancer, you will know about it eventually. Why not be proactive and know about it in time – when you can have more control over the situation?

Still another segment of the female population doesn't receive mammograms simply because they lack insurance or cannot afford them. This is unacceptable. There are resources to help women in this situation. The Lee County Health Department is a partner in the Well Woman of

Northwest Illinois Program. This program provides clinical breast exams, mammograms and pap tests to women who are age and income eligible who lack insurance. Please call toll-free at 1-866-590-8499 for additional information or to check for eligibility.

No one likes to think about breast cancer. We know that 1 in 8 women will develop it at some point in their lives. We know there are certain factors that increase a woman's risk of developing it. Unfortunately, although there are things we can do to decrease our risk, there is no way to prevent breast cancer. The bottom line is that our best protection is early detection. Be proactive and take control by following the American Cancer Society's guidelines of regular mammograms starting by age 40 (possibly earlier if you have a family history). If your doctor doesn't bring the subject up, ask about it. I can't stress enough how important it is to take charge of your own health. Breast cancer detected at its earliest stage has an incredibly high survival rate. Early detection also increases treatment options and the chance to save the breast. Mammograms can detect tumors when they are too small to be felt. They are not 100% accurate, but they are highly accurate and our best defense.

If you already receive regular mammograms – good for you, keep up the good work. If you are overdue, call today to schedule your appointment. If you have never had one, please think about all the reasons it would be a good idea. Being a woman is a beautiful thing – take care of yourself so you can be here as long as possible to enjoy life's gifts. If you would like additional information on breast cancer, please contact the Lee County Health Department at 284-3371 or the American Cancer Society at 1-800-892-9296.

For additional information on the Lee County Health Department and our community services, please visit our website at [www.lchd.com](http://www.lchd.com).

-Submitted by Cathy Ferguson, MPH, Public Health Administrator