

Helping women make the right choices

Europa Donna launches Breast Health Day

→ Janet Fricker

A variety of factors are now known to contribute to raising women's risk of developing breast cancer. Ensuring key messages on breast health become as familiar as the message 'Smoking is bad for your health' may help prevent needless suffering and death.

In the last few years a plethora of studies have been published revealing the specific lifestyle changes women can be making throughout their lives to help them avoid a diagnosis of breast cancer. Research has shown that around one-third of breast cancer cases can be directly attributed to increased weight and lack of physical activity. Alcohol consumption, hormone replacement therapy and the contraceptive pill have also been shown to increase a woman's risk of developing breast cancer. Additional evidence suggests that reproductive factors, such as having children at a younger age, having several pregnancies and breast feeding, all have a role to play in protecting against breast cancer, along with starting menstruation late and experiencing menopause at an early age.

While such research is well known to the oncology community, concerns are growing that it is not reaching the wider audience of women in Europe, and is

therefore having little effect on the incidence of breast cancer. Europa Donna, the European Breast Cancer Coalition, has now taken up the challenge of getting the information out to women of all ages in Europe. "Given that there is now concrete research about very specific changes women can make to their lives to avoid breast cancer, we feel that it is our obligation as advocates to get this information across to the general public," said Susan Knox, Europa Donna's executive director.

"Some risk factors, such as the time of starting menstruation, menopause and number of births, women can't do much to change. But we want them to realise that there are decisions they can make about leading a healthy lifestyle that have an influence and help them to avoid a diagnosis of breast cancer." With 132,000 European women dying from breast cancer and 430,000 being diagnosed with the disease each year, says Knox, it is vital to get the message across.

The initiative is not a question of changing priorities for Europa Donna, Knox stresses, but of adding a third focus to their range of interests. The campaign, will not in any way detract from Europa Donna's long-term initiatives on early detection and optimal treatment of breast cancer through population-based mammography screening and specialist breast units, as stipulated in the *European guidelines for quality assurance in breast cancer screening and diagnosis*.

To ensure attention gets focused on breast health, Europa Donna have dedicated a special day – October 15 – to raising awareness. Last October 15, Europa Donna got the ball rolling by hosting a media event in Milan, Italy. The aim was two-fold: to train Europa Donna representatives on the published research and get journalists up to speed, and encourage them to start writing about the issues.

Thirty-two national representatives and delegates from Europa Donna's 41



BREAST HEALTH MESSAGES

- Women should limit their weight gain in adult life and maintain a body mass index (BMI) of 18.5–24.9. They should also try to limit their amount of abdominal fat.
- Women who have had breast cancer may reduce the chances of recurrence by maintaining a healthy weight.
- Engaging in moderate exercise for at least 30–60 minutes every day may help maintain breast health.
- Eating a well-balanced diet (with fat intake not exceeding 30%), including fresh fruit and vegetables, and limiting intake of red meat, has numerous health benefits.
- Limiting alcohol intake to one glass of wine or beer a day (10g alcohol or less per day) can help keep breasts healthy.
- Having children at a younger age, having several and breast-feeding can also protect against breast cancer.
- Hormone replacement therapy raises the risk of breast cancer. Women should discuss the pros and cons with their doctor.
- Women who attend screening have a greater chance of surviving a breast cancer diagnosis.

Spreading the word. Europa Donna hopes that naming October 15 Breast Health Day will help focus media attention on the key messages women need to know about how to minimise their risk of developing breast cancer

member countries were in attendance, in addition to journalists from Italy, Cyprus, Lithuania, Malta, Romania, Slovenia, Sweden and the UK. “We particularly wanted to target writers on popular health and women’s magazines, to help us reach out to a younger and wider audience,” said Knox. “In the past, women didn’t feel that they needed to worry about their breast health until they were in their 40s, but new research shows they should start following pre-

vention guidelines from an early age.”

Invited speakers included Philippe Brunet, head of cabinet to the EU Commissioner for Health, Carlo La Vecchia, advisor to the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), Alberto Costa, director of the European School of Oncology and Umberto Veronesi, scientific director of the European School of Oncology and a Senator in the upper house of the Italian Parliament.

“Breast Health Day serves to keep

this issue in the public eye but, maybe more importantly, at a higher level of priority in decision makers’ minds,” Brunet told the meeting, adding that in 2009 the Commission plans to set up a new EU Platform for Action on Cancer to provide the framework for identifying, sharing and spreading information about cancer prevention and screening. He called for improved communication strategies between citizens, to encourage and educate them about healthy lifestyle

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choices. "Because in cancer, as in many other important diseases, every person can play a pivotal role in shaping his or her own health through the daily choices made," he said.

THE EVIDENCE

Presenting a primer on prevention research, La Vecchia, told the audience that there is now enough evidence to show that avoiding weight gain in adult life can reduce the risk of postmenopausal breast cancer. For postmenopausal women who already have breast cancer, losing weight could reduce the risk of recurrence. Regular physical activity also reduces the risk of breast cancer by around 20%, he said, and this effect seems to be independent of body weight. The evidence also shows that alcohol consumption increases the risk of breast cancer, he added.

Citing the findings of a French study conducted in 2000, which calculated the percentage of breast cancer cases that can be attributed to identified risk factors, La Vecchia said almost 11% of breast cancers could be attributed to the combined use of hormone replacement therapy and oral contraceptives, and about 10% to physical inactivity. Almost 10% are due to alcohol consumption, over 5% to reproductive factors, and almost 5% to being overweight or obese.

In an upbeat presentation, Umberto Veronesi said, "zero mortality" due to breast cancer is a goal that should one day become a reality. Prevention through lifestyle is important, he said, but the potential of detection techniques, including mammography, ultrasound and MRI, should not be forgotten. "If we

Europa Donna

Europa Donna, the European Breast Cancer Coalition (www.europadonna.org), is an independent non-profit organisation, whose members are affiliated groups from countries throughout Europe. Launched in 1994, the coalition works to raise awareness of breast cancer and mobilise support from European women in pressing for improved breast cancer education, appropriate screening, optimal treatment and increased funding for research. Europa Donna represents the interests of European women regarding breast cancer to local and national authorities as well as to institutions of the EU.

In recent years, the coalition's main focus has been lobbying for the implementation of population-based mammography screening across Europe, and for specialist breast units. They have published a *Short guide to the European guidelines for quality assurance in breast cancer screening and diagnosis* to use as a tool for implementing these programmes. Key future initiatives include communicating to women in their own language. Translations of the *Short guide* into 10 languages has already begun.

Europa Donna's membership has expanded in recent years, from 15 countries in 1998 to 42 countries in 2009. The coalition provides training programmes for advocates and hosts its own pan-European conference every two years. The next conference will be held this year in Stockholm, Sweden, October 24–25.

could reach the objective and identify small tumours that are not palpable, we could reach the vision of very close to zero mortality," he said, adding that survival has been observed to be directly proportional to the size of the tumour at diagnosis. For every millimetre increase in tumour diameter, there is a 1% reduced chance of survival at 10 years.

Europa Donna has published key information on lifestyle factors, prevention, screening and advocacy in a new booklet, *EUROPA DONNA guide to breast health*, which was launched at the event. Information is also available online at www.breasthealthday.org.

"We felt the media day was a great success and showed there was real agreement across Europe on how much we need to work together on breast

health issues," said Knox, who points out that the ultimate success of the event can only really be judged by the media coverage generated. Seeing articles in print may take time, since breast cancer articles in the popular press are often held back for Breast Cancer Awareness month in October. "Since women's magazines have a tendency to plan their coverage well ahead, we felt it important to get journalists up to speed on the issues ahead, in the hope that they'll bear us in mind next year," said Knox, adding that, in future, Breast Health Day may focus on a particular aspect of the campaign, whether it be physical activity, obesity, body mass index, diet or alcohol, and each individual Europa Donna group would be asked to develop a media plan around it for their own country.

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