

NEW YORK POST

Health

WELLNESS, FITNESS & MEDICINE

By ERIKA PRAFDER

CHAIN OF HEART

Through a support group, those battling breast cancer forge links with other survivors

FIVE years ago, at age 35, Elissa Sharin had her first mammogram.

"My mother had breast cancer, so I scheduled mine early," says the wife and mother of three from Atlantic Beach, N.Y.

She returned routinely and at age 37, calcifications were detected which can be indicative of breast cancer. A biopsy proved malignant.

While bent on having a double mastectomy, Sharin was still unclear about her reconstruction options. Although her mother was able to lend invaluable emotional support, "She wasn't up to date on the newest surgeries," says Sharin. In addition, "I had three young kids and wanted tips on how others informed their children about the disease."

A friend and breast cancer survivor recommended that Sharin reach out to Sharsheret, a breast cancer support group.

Founded in 2001, the national nonprofit organization originated to support young women of Jewish backgrounds facing breast cancer. According to Sharsheret's director of operations, Elana Silber, this is of special importance to Ashkenazi Jews. "One in 40 carry a breast cancer gene mutation," she says.

Says Sharin: "As soon as I called [Sharsheret], they referred me to their Links program."

Links is just one of Sharsheret's many educational

and outreach programs, which are open to all denominations. Through this peer support network, women can connect with others who have been in their shoes. More than 1,650 women have participated in the program, according to Silber.

Sharin now serves as a Link herself. "It felt good to be able to give back. It's scary when you're diagnosed, and so good to be able to talk to someone who knows what you're going through."

Roughly five years after receiving her stage three breast cancer diagnosis, 42-year-old wife and mother of two Lori Bosses of Manhattan's Upper West Side is not yet emotionally ready to wholeheartedly participate as a Link in Sharsheret's peer network, although she gratefully received help from the program



Christian Johnston

when she herself needed it most.

"I'm an unofficial Link, but I'm still so angry that this happened to me. It may sound selfish, but I need to think about breast cancer as little as possible. Life got scarier," says Bosses. "Sharsheret's Links are so gracious. Life is busy



Elissa Sharin (left), Tammi Fox (above left) and Lori Bosses: Part of a breast cancer support chain.

and people I didn't even know gave up hours of time for me. When you encounter people who are walking in or have walked in your shoes, it makes you feel you're not so alone. It gives you hope."

As an educational resource, Sharsheret proved life-changing for Tammi Fox, a wife and mother of two from Suffern, N.Y.

"I lead a very healthy lifestyle. I don't drink. I exercise. I wanted and had planned to have a third

child," says Fox, who discovered she had breast cancer at age 38.

Through Sharsheret, "The biggest piece of advice was to have genetic testing. If a person has a certain gene mutation (BRCA), there is a greater likelihood of developing breast and ovarian cancer," says Fox.

Fox was tested and found to be positive for the gene. "I needed a bilateral mastectomy and my ovaries and fallopian tubes removed. I didn't have to agonize over the decision," she says.

Today, helping others is enabling Fox to heal.

"I'm already a Sharsheret Link for someone. It felt so good to be able to give back," says Fox.

Info: 866-474-2774; sharsheret.org.

Helene Seidman

GET PROACTIVE

ABOUT one in eight American women will get breast cancer, according to The American Cancer Society.

"Breast cancer is often the most-feared disease of women," says Tessa Cigler, MD, MPH (right), a board-certified medical oncologist and researcher with the Weill Cornell Breast Center. "I think there are some lifestyle risk factors," Cigler says. "[There are] lifestyle modifications I tell all of my patients to practice."

For women who might be at an increased risk of breast cancer — based on family history, biopsies with atypical cells



or being over the age of 60 — there are two FDA-approved medications that are very effective in decreasing the risk of breast cancer by 50 percent, Cigler says. These are tamoxifen (used to treat breast cancer) and raloxifene (used to treat osteoporosis).

Also, in the results of a recent randomized study of 3,000 women, those who took exemestane, a pill used to treat breast cancer, "showed a 60 percent reduced risk of developing breast cancer," says Cigler. "This is the first study to show its efficacy in the prevention of breast cancer."

While exemestane is not yet approved by the FDA for use as a preventative, says Cigler, "I anticipate the study will go a

Lifestyle and medication options can lower your risk

long way in terms of getting it approved. The surprising thing is that these medicines have been around a long time but no one knows about them. And many women who do know about them choose not to take them. Women get nervous about taking prevention medications."

In about five years, a breast cancer vaccine may be on the market, says Linda Vahdat, MD, director of the Breast Cancer Research Program and chief of the Solid Tumor Service at Weill Cornell Medical College.

Currently, says Vahdat, "some interesting ones are being developed."

"There are clinical trials for vaccines, and there is preliminary data that looks interesting," Vahdat says. — Diane Herbst

STAYING CANCER-FREE
Dr. Cigler's tips include:

►EXERCISE

It can reduce the risk of breast cancer, and it doesn't have to be vigorous. "Even walking for 30 minutes three times a week [can help]."

►EAT A HEART-HEALTHY DIET

This has been shown to also decrease breast cancer risk. Include plenty of whole grains, vegetables and fruit.

►MAINTAIN A HEALTHY BODY WEIGHT

This is especially important in postmenopausal women.

►AVOID TAKING HORMONE REPLACEMENT THERAPY

Exceptions are those with medical contraindications.

— Diane Herbst