Breast cancer: Survival isn’t a woman’s only concern

Almost from birth, girls are programmed to believe breasts are the primary symbol of femininity and desirability. From Barbie’s hourglass figure to Victoria’s Secret ads, the message that breasts are a woman’s most important physical asset is inescapable.

Imagine, then, the emotional devastation experienced when a woman is diagnosed with breast cancer. In addition to embarking on a fight for her life, she must also grapple with fear that treatment determining whether she lives or dies might result in a misshapen breast or the loss of a breast altogether.

Recent decisions by actresses Angela Jolie and Christina Applegate to undergo preventive double mastectomies have gone a long way toward easing women’s fears that breast cancer can take their sexuality as well as their lives. After all, both Jolie and Applegate underwent reconstructive surgery that left them red-carpet ready, with no outwardly visible signs of their treatment.

Still, even the thought of breast cancer fills women with fear. U.S. Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz, who chairs the Democratic National Committee, underwent seven breast cancer surgeries in 2008 while maintaining her duties as a member of the House. Here’s how she described breast cancer: “Breast cancer is not just a disease that strikes at women. It strikes at the very heart of who we are as women: how others perceive us; how we perceive ourselves; how we live, work and raise our families – or whether we do these things at all.”

October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month – a time when people wear pink ribbons in honor of the women currently fighting breast cancer and those who have gone before them. It’s also a month in which individuals and corporations participate in fundraisers, with money earmarked for breast cancer detection, treatment and research.

Just as important, though, are efforts to drum home the facts about breast cancer. According to the National Breast Cancer Organization:

» One in eight women will be diagnosed with breast cancer during her lifetime.
» Breast cancer is the most commonly diagnosed cancer in women.
» Breast cancer is the second leading cause of death among women.
» More than 220,000 women in the United States are diagnosed with breast cancer each year and more than 40,000 will die.
» Although breast cancer in men is rare, an estimated 2,150 men will be diagnosed this year and approximately 410 will die.

Breast cancer and fear

Many breast cancer patients – and individuals diagnosed with other types of cancer too – will tell you their first reaction was abject fear. Even if initial treatment is successful, there is always worry that the cancer will return. As a survivor named Debbie told breastcancer.org, “I live with the fear of this disease coming back. Any little pain, any little
cough, I worry. I’m constantly checking myself, my breasts. I’m at the red light, in the car, and I’m checking myself. I’m obsessive-compulsive about doing my breast exam. I say to myself, ‘I will conquer and overcome,’ but it’s a struggle for me.”

When a cancer patient is fighting for life, the last thing needed is additional stress. After all, many doctors believe stress can impede recovery, a concern that is confirmed by a recent Wake Forest study that indicates once cancer has taken hold, stress biochemically feeds its growth.⁵

With that in mind, a cancer patient should not be worrying about how to pay the bills during treatment and recovery. That’s why health insurance is so important – and why women should make sure they have the right combination of major medical and voluntary insurance coverage in place.

Cancer/specified-disease insurance can go a long way toward helping women focus on recovery, rather than on financial concerns. A supplemental policy helps protect a patient’s income and savings from expenses that aren’t covered by major medical insurance, including the cost of:

- Deductibles.
- Out-of-network specialists.
- Experimental cancer treatment.
- Travel and lodging when treatment is far from home.
- Child care and household help.
- Normal living expenses, such as the mortgage or rent, car payments, credit card payments, food and utility bills.

No one likes to think they or a loved one will experience cancer, but new diagnoses are made daily. The National Cancer Institute estimates that 13.7 million Americans with a history of cancer were alive on Jan. 1, 2013. Some of these individuals were cancer-free, while others were still undergoing treatment.⁴

If you are a woman – or there is a woman in your life who is important to you – check your health insurance to ensure you have the right coverage in place. It’s the caring thing to do for both yourself and your loved ones because, in the event of a cancer diagnosis, you’ll be able to focus on getting better and not on how you’ll pay the bills.

**Sources**