

An Unexpected Breast Cancer Patient

Jim Clauson and his wife, Linda, were lying on a beach in the Bahamas when he mentioned to her that he had a lump close to his nipple. It was April 2004, less than one year since Linda had discovered she had breast cancer, and neither Jim nor Linda suspected he might have the same disease. But he did.

The Clausons' initial reaction to the news that he had breast cancer, says Jim, was shock. "At that point, I didn't know that men could get breast cancer and neither did my wife. But we all know that men have breasts, and it makes sense a man could develop cancer. It's the same disease that women can get."

Breast cancer among men receives little attention, in part because of the low incidence of the disease. According to estimates of the American Cancer Society, breast cancer among women is 100 times more common than among men. However, there is an underlying assumption that men do not get the disease, and Jim fears this may prevent men from detecting the disease at an early stage. Today, he is a match peer counselor for Y-ME and is trying to spread the word that breast cancer can happen to anyone.

"My big thing is that I see all kinds of commercials that relate to women, and they never mention men. I can sit on the sidelines a little bit because there are 213,000 women diagnosed annually and only around 1,700 men, but at the same time, it wouldn't hurt if people were told that men get breast cancer too," he says.

The rates between the genders may differ, but the risk factors for men are very similar to those of women. The chance that a man will develop breast cancer increases with age. The development of breast cancer in relatives or the presence of mutations to the BRCA1 or BRCA2 genes also places men at higher risk.

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Likewise, breast cancer in men and women has virtually the same treatment considerations, and stage for stage, the same prognosis. The sooner breast cancer is discovered and treated in men, the more likely they are to survive.

Because men have much less breast tissue than women, cancer does not have to grow far to reach the skin surface and usually presents itself as a small lump, dimpling of the skin or changes in the nipple. Once brought to the attention of a doctor, a biopsy or mammogram may be used to determine if breast cancer is present. Treatment depends on

the individual case, with options that include mastectomy, chemotherapy, radiation therapy and hormone therapy.

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"As far as cancer goes, I personally feel like whatever the doctors say they have to take off, it's got to go," he says. "But I did a match call with a guy who was as different as night and day from my feelings on the subject. I don't think it affects any two people the same way. But you know, everyone sheds a few tears."

The Clausons are a lesson in resilience, having both survived breast cancer that occurred within months of each other. "In a strange way, Linda and I feel blessed that through our experiences we can help others cope with breast cancer," Jim says. "We want to spread the word that men do get breast cancer. It sounds weird, but things happen for a reason, and I just have a feeling that that's why this happened." ♣

RESOURCES:

The American Cancer Society
www.cancer.org

John W. Nick Foundation
www.johnwnickfoundation.org

Speak with Someone Who's Been There

Jim Clauson is a match peer counselor on Y-ME's Hotline, both as a survivor and as a partner of a survivor. If you would like to speak with someone who has had a similar diagnosis or life experience as you, please call us at 800-221-2141 and we'll pair you with a person who really understands your concerns—a woman or man who has been there.

Likewise, our Partners Match Program provides support and education for people who are supporting a wife or partner through breast cancer. Simply call the Hotline at 800-221-2141 and ask to leave a message for the Partner's Match Program volunteer who will return your call as soon as possible.