Dense breast tissue and cancer risk

You’ve had your annual mammogram and the results came back clear. Whew! But now you have a letter from the radiologist’s office saying you have dense breast tissue and that this may be a risk for breast cancer. What can you do?

First, understand what dense breast tissue means. Dense breast tissue refers to how the breast tissue appears on a mammogram, not how a breast feels. Dense breast tissue is normal and common. Let’s break it down. A woman’s breasts are made up of milk glands and ducts, as well as connective tissue (which tends to be dense) and fatty tissue (which is not as dense). When the majority or nearly all of a woman’s breast tissue is dense, she is considered to have dense breasts, according to the Mayo Clinic.

“Dense breast tissue may incrementally increase the risk of breast cancer,” said Lydia Schrader, M.D., breast surgeon at Enloe Medical Center. While newer studies may contradict this finding, dense breast tissue can make it harder to “see” a small, early breast cancer.

On a mammogram, tumors and dense tissue can both appear white, making it more difficult for the tumor to show through. Fatty tissue appears dark gray to black on a mammogram, so a tumor, often being more dense and white, is easier for the radiologist to see.

Younger women, premenopausal women and those who take hormone therapy for menopause are more likely to have dense breast tissue, according to the Mayo Clinic. But, Dr. Schrader adds, breast density is not fixed and may vary over time due to variability in the radiologist’s interpretation, a woman’s physiological changes due to menopause or use of hormones, and even how the breast is positioned during the mammogram.

Your screening options

Whether or not you have dense breast tissue, digital and 3-D screening mammography are excellent ways to find breast cancer early. But for those with dense breast tissue, additional imaging tools may help to increase the rate of identification of early breast cancer. These could include ultrasound – either whole-breast screening or targeted – to check areas that look or feel abnormal, breast MRI or molecular breast imaging, said Dr. Schrader. She also notes there are no formal guidelines by either the American College of Radiology or the American Cancer Society regarding breast imaging for women with dense breast tissue, and some of these tests are not covered by insurance.

The United States Preventive Services Task Force recommends mammograms every other year for women ages 50 to 74. The decision to begin mammograms before age 50, to continue after 74 years old, or to do mammograms every year should be made with your primary physician and consider personal values and risk factors.

The power of breast awareness

While breast self-exams are currently not recommended as part of screening because research has not found a benefit, having awareness of your breasts is important. Be encouraged to note changes. For instance, note if you find a lump that is hard like a BB, marble or golf ball; if you notice a change in the texture of your breasts; if your skin begins to dimple or becomes red; or you become aware of a change in the position of your nipples, breast symmetry or see a discharge from your nipples.

“You are your own best advocate!” said Dr. Schrader. “Report any perceived changes to your doctor as soon as you are aware of them, ask questions if the explanation is not clear and persist until you get an answer that satisfies your concerns.”
A year after retiring, James Aram was ready to get back in a classroom. “I think it was Helen Keller who said something like, ‘Life’s an adventure or it’s nothing,’” the 66-year-old said. “I feel learning is lifelong or else you’re stuck.”

The former IT professional had several friends who were members of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI), and in the fall of 2013, he joined. The program is offered through California State University, Chico, and allows adults 50 years or older — or those who are retired — to explore new subjects. In the spring, OLLI partnered with Enloe Medical Center to offer its members “Healthier You,” a lecture series on health-related topics led by physicians and clinicians associated with Enloe.

James Aram attended several of those presentations and found them insightful. Now that Enloe is offering a fall session, he’s excited to see what he’ll learn this term.

In our stage of life, there’s a continual parade of events — things that pop up — that people are sometimes concerned about,” he said. “The medical presenters I saw did a great job of telling us what’s normal, what’s not and what can be done.”

Series in full swing
The fall session kicked off Sept. 5 and consists of seven classes on a variety of topics — some a direct result of student feedback during the spring course and some selected because they affect so many in the community. Among the topics discussed earlier in the fall series were respiratory illness and joint replacement. Still to come, presenters will discuss breast cancer, Alzheimer’s disease and type 2 diabetes. While these can be big issues, they can be affected through simple steps, like healthier diets and regular exercise, said Enloe’s Community Outreach Coordinator Deanna Reed.

Outpatient Clinical Dietitian Mary Aram, RD, CDE, who is also James Aram’s wife, is excited to present about type 2 diabetes with other Enloe Diabetes Services care providers.

Often, it takes seeding a person with multiple messages for them to decide they’re finally ready to talk to their doctor or make a lifestyle change,” she said. “Knowing that we’re providing one more of those seed experiences through OLLI feels good and is a part of the mission of Diabetes Services at Enloe.”

Lectures are a hit
The partnership with Enloe was a “natural fit” and OLLI members have enjoyed the series, said Ann Nikolai, OLLI’s program director.

“OLLI members are savvy people, and access to expert advice and information on some of these relevant issues is helpful and appreciated,” she said.

But OLLI members aren’t the only ones who liked the series. Shawn Furst, D.O., of Enloe’s Pain Management Program, presented in the spring and attended several “Healthier You” lectures related to his field.

“Providers are constantly educating themselves through different means,

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Upcoming OLLI classes
Breast health and breast cancer (Nov. 7)
Type 2 diabetes (Nov. 14)
Dementia and Alzheimer’s disease (Nov. 28)
Find your Zen

Inhale. Exhale. Feeling less frazzled already? If you find yourself in a constant state of stress and in desperate need of relaxation, you might benefit from practicing mindfulness. Mindful living is about living in the moment, slowing down, and paying attention to your mind and body.

Why practice mindfulness?
Several studies have found that mindfulness improves mental health. Mindfulness can:

> **Reduce stress.** According to the American Psychological Association (APA), those who practice mindfulness report reduced anxiety levels, depression and rumination (continued worrying about a stressor).

> **Boost memory.** Participants in a high-stress situation who practiced mindfulness over an eight-week period increased their working memory capacity, according to research cited by the APA.

> **Improve cognition.** Practicing mindfulness through meditation may help you clear your mind and improve your focus. Research published in the journal *Consciousness and Cognition* determined that even brief meditation can enhance one’s ability to sustain attention.

So, how do you get started?
Mindfulness is about finding time to notice yourself, your body and your thoughts. To begin:

> **Find a quiet place to relax.** Often, this can be in the corner of a quiet room. Be sure to limit your distractions, such as phones, TVs and pets.

> **Sit up straight on a sturdy chair or firm pillow.** Wobbly seats can be distractions.

> **Keep your eyes open.** Let your eyes rest wherever your gaze takes you.

> **Focus on your breath.** Try not to control or improve the way you are breathing, but notice how you are breathing.

> **Allow your mind to wander.** Meditation isn’t about erasing thoughts, but the awareness of your thoughts. If you hear a bird singing or clock ticking, or catch yourself making a list in your head, bring your thoughts back to your breath and note that thinking has just occurred.

Mindfulness is about finding time to notice yourself, your body and your thoughts.
Colorful stuffed peppers

Add some fun to dinner with bright, stuffed bell peppers that will have your family asking for seconds.

Number of servings: 4

Ingredients
4 large red, yellow or green bell peppers
1 tablespoon olive oil
1 large clove garlic, minced
2 tablespoons minced onion
2 dried red chilies
½ cup diced tomatoes, peeled and seeded
15.5-ounce can black beans, drained and rinsed
2 cups cooked brown rice
½ cup water

Directions
1. Wash peppers and cut off tops. Remove seeds and set tops aside.
2. Put peppers in a baking dish.
3. Heat oil in a skillet, and sauté garlic, onion, and dried red chilies until onion is soft (about 5 minutes).
4. Add tomatoes, beans and brown rice. Mix well. Spoon mixture into peppers and place tops back on peppers.
5. Add water to pan. Cover and bake at 375 degrees for about 45 minutes or until peppers are soft.

Nutritional information per serving: 289 calories, 11 g protein, 5 g fat, 53 g carbohydrates, 12 g fiber and 8 mg sodium.

Class is in session
Fall OLLI series explores health topics

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as medicine and technology advance," he said. “Even though the OLLI lectures were not presented with a physician audience in mind, I suspected I would still learn some things, and I did.”

Enloe plans to offer the series again to OLLI members in the fall of 2018. To learn more about OLLI, visit rce.csuchico.edu/lifelong-learning.