



This year's Dipsea Hike/Run for Zero Breast Cancer on September 7th is an opportunity for both young and old to learn about the benefits of physical activity. Being physically active reduces one's risk of breast cancer and may reduce risk of recurrence. Photo by Patti Spinks.

# Troubling problem

## Numbers of breast cancer cases high for Marin County

■ BY NEAL REID

For decades, Marin County has been a spike on the graph that plots the incidence of breast cancer in women in California, and that trend has shown no signs of changing, according to recent data collected by researchers.

Marin County was one of four areas of concern identified by the Public Health Institute's California Breast Cancer Mapping Project in early December due to its elevated rate of breast cancer. According to the project, the number of breast cancer cases in Marin was 10 to 20 percent higher than the state average between 2000-08.

Researchers found a number of socioeconomic and demographic factors they believe contribute to the statistics.

"The four places that were areas of concern had a higher percentage of white women than the rest of California," said Dr. Eric Roberts, a pediatrician and research scientist who headed the Public

Health Institute's study. "From the demographic analysis, we know the incidence of invasive breast cancer is higher among white women than other women. We also found that, generally speaking, women in the area tended to get their cancer caught earlier and were more likely to have private insurance.

"So, there were a couple markers of social privilege that were pointing in the customary direction."

A new report by the Cancer Prevention Institute of California (CPIC) corroborated the mapping project's findings, noting that the rate of invasive breast cancer incidence in Marin County was higher than the state average in 2010. For that year in California, the rate of incidence was 137.2 for every 100,000, with the number climbing to 142.1 for Marin County.

Because of the discovery of the link between hormone replacement therapy and breast cancer, women everywhere have eliminated or cut back on

the treatment, so the total number of cases is lower than 10 years ago. However, the CDIC found that rates have begun to climb again "for reasons that are not yet clear."

Numerous organizations, hospitals, researchers and doctors have worked tirelessly in recent years to identify risk factors they believe increase a woman's chance of developing the disease. In Marin, one of the groups leading that charge is the San Rafael-based nonprofit Zero Breast Cancer.

"We're unique among other breast cancer organizations in that our focus has always been finding the causes of breast cancer," said Janice Barlow, director of Zero Breast Cancer. "We're a community-based organization dedicated to finding the cause of breast cancer and prevention through community participation and scientific research. We focus on identifying the environmental factors and the role they play in breast cancer in all stages of life and across generations.

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Janice Barlow  
Zero Breast Cancer



*"So far, we haven't found that 'silver bullet' that prevents all breast cancer. But we know from research that women who actively manage their risks tend to have lower breast cancer rates than those who don't."*

Dr. Francine Halberg  
Marin Specialty Care

## Breast Cancer

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"It's hard to avoid it unless you know what risk factors are associated with it or what cause it."

Zero Breast Cancer has brought in nearly \$80 million in federal research grants to the community in the last 17 years, according to Barlow, and works diligently with other groups in the medical community to form a united front dedicated to making progress.

"We played a role in getting various different partners and groups in Marin County together to address the issue," Barlow said. "One of the amazing things about Marin is that there are all of these different groups with different perspectives working on the same issue. I think we're a model for other communities for how advocacy and interest

in research around a public health concern can enable you to move forward and take action to bring resources into your community."

Common risk factors that have been identified by Barlow's group and physicians alike as elements that increase a woman's likelihood of getting breast cancer include smoking, hormone replacement therapy, lack of exercise, unhealthy eating habits and exposure to radiation. While there has been no discovery of a clear-cut cause of breast cancer, doctors and experts in the field believe these factors, and more, are all pieces of the puzzle.

"You can say that breast cancer, like many cancers, is clearly a mix of genetic, environmental and behavioral factors that are all contributing," Roberts said. "The frustrating part is that we really know little about what's most important in that mix. We can clearly find signals that all three of those things are operating, but it's really tough

to prioritize them more when we find geographic regions like (Marin), where there's clearly higher amounts of breast cancer, to find out what is contributing to that."

It is a puzzling riddle for most involved, but doctors have discovered a variety of methods for limiting risk and spreading education about risk factors that weren't paramount years ago.

"So far, we haven't found that 'silver bullet' that prevents all breast cancer," said Dr. Francine Halberg, a radiologist at Marin Specialty Care who has done considerable work at the Marin Cancer Institute. "But we know from research that women who actively manage their risks tend to have lower breast cancer rates than those who don't. Educating women about how to assess and reduce their individual risk of breast cancer is a primary focus of what we do at Marin Cancer Institute.

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Mark Lawler, MD; Holly Kelly, MD; Daniel Solomon, MD;  
Kevin Holman, PA-C; Louisa Munger, PA-C; Aimee Spencer, PA

**WWW.MARINORTHOPEDICS.COM**

7100 Redwood Blvd. Suite 200 Novato, California 94945

P: 415.492.1600 F: 415.492.1688

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# Breast Cancer

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“We provide information, classes and one-on-one instruction on what women need to know about their risk based on individual factors such as family history and lifestyle, as well as their physical characteristics.”

This is particularly important for women of Marin County, who have become afflicted by the disease more frequently.

“All of these risk factors are based on the research, but it doesn’t completely explain the high incidence of breast cancer in Marin County,” Barlow said. “It explains some of it, but not all of it. So, there’s some things we don’t understand that may be contributing in these areas of concern, and that’s why we continue to look at different things to see what role they may be playing.”

There have been other advancements in the realm of breast cancer research that are aiding doctors in treating the disease in their communities.

“The biggest advance in breast cancer treatment is the realization that breast cancer isn’t a single disease—it is a number of different diseases that we can now define,” Halberg said. “Understanding that has allowed us to begin to tailor treatment to each individual patient and their specific tumor situation, with improved effectiveness.”

Continued research, the evolution of treatment techniques and procedures and a more in-depth

knowledge of the disease’s potential causes and risk factors have also helped the public more effectively deal with breast cancer.

“The variety of treatment options for patients is greater than ever,” Halberg said. “Often, this allows us to do less than we might have in the past, whether it is a breast-conserving approach, less radiation, avoiding removal of lymph nodes, or avoiding chemotherapy when possible. We’re now applying personalized medicine—including individual genetic traits—to decide how best to tackle each person’s case.”

“Cancer treatment today is a team effort with the patient and all of the involved physicians. By having everyone work so closely together, we can push our program to be even better. We also review open research studies (clinical trials) for each patient—both the initial findings, and, whether our patients might benefit from participation.

“The result is that cure rates are up and patients experience fewer side effects,” Halberg said. “Survival rates have continued to climb, and currently stand at 84.5 percent nationally, 85.2 percent in California, and—I’m proud to say—89 percent here at the Marin Cancer Institute. For both early stage breast cancer and late-stage disease, our survival rates are higher than the National Cancer Database and the California database, which is among the highest survival rates of any cancer center in the country.”

Women making a concerted effort to avoid the risk factors and seek out educational materials are keys to the county’s overall health when it comes

to breast cancer.

“Every woman must be proactive in taking charge of her health—and we’re seeing that here in Marin,” Halberg said. “Women’s awareness of their own bodies and their risk factors is key. We strive to empower women in our community to do everything possible to reduce their risk, and if they have breast cancer, to find it early.”

Both Barlow and Halberg suggest that, for a woman to effectively lower her risk factors, she should exercise regularly (four hours per week), avoid smoking, maintain a healthy weight, eat a balanced diet that includes green, leafy vegetables and whole grains, avoid chemicals in cleaning agents, household products and cosmetics and limit consumption of alcohol. Those are just a few ways to limit the risk factors, but there are more.

There is hope for area women who have high risk and who are suffering from the diabolical disease, but there is still plenty of work for doctors and research scientists to do to continue to advance the fight. Reports like the mapping project and the CDIC’s incidence-rate study are crucial in helping identify the parameters of the disease.

“The whole risk factor picture is changing,” Barlow said. “This (mapping) report, to me, is the first step in identifying areas that are of concern and for researchers who are advocates interested in breast cancer to look in-depth at what the demographics are and what are the types of breast cancer in this community. It’s an opportunity to drill down in these areas and maybe find some new information that’s useful to everyone.” ■

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pun intended

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