Cancer rate alarming in Louisiana

Blacks remain at higher risk than whites, Hispanics

Experts say more women are surviving breast cancer as a result of improvements in early detection methods and more effective, targeted treatment. “We continue to make great strides in research and patient care,” said Dr. Heather West, assistant professor in the Lester and Sue Smith Breast Center at Baylor College of Medicine. “Survival rates have greatly improved the past 10 years.”

But, while numbers have improved for the overall population, black women remain at a much higher risk than whites (as much as two to one in some age groups) and Hispanics. And locally, both incidents and death rates are higher than the state and national averages.

Whites experience higher incidence rates, but mortality numbers are higher for black women than any other group. Blacks are about 34 percent more likely to die of cancer than are whites and more than twice as likely than other groups.

A recent study concluded that the five-year survival rate of breast cancer is 74 percent for blacks, compared to 89 percent for whites.

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Numbers are equally disturbing for Louisiana, compared with the rest of the country, according to numbers provided by Miles Perret Cancer Services, a local agency that provides assistance to help cancer patients and their families meet the many non-medical needs that emerge with a cancer diagnosis.

The American Cancer Society estimates that 2,700 women in Louisiana, and 192,370 in the U.S. would be diagnosed with breast cancer in 2009. ACS estimates 690 women in the state, and 40,170 women in the U.S. died of the disease in 2008.

That death rate is particularly high in Louisiana which sees 29.7 deaths per 100,000 cases compared to 25.0 deaths per 100,000 nationally. In Lafayette, the disparity grows with a rate from 32.1 to 34.0 deaths for every 100,000 cases.

Louisiana as a whole actually has a lower rate of breast cancer cases than the nation at 120.9 per capita compared to 123.9 per capita nationally.

Locally, though, the rates are quite high. In Lafayette and St. Martin, incident rates range from 123.6 to 130.8 per capita. In Iberia Parish, as many as 130.9 to 153.6 incidents occur per capita.

The local Miles Perret Cancer Services is serving 534 breast cancer patients and their families, a 37 percent increase since January 2009. Since 2002, Miles Perret has aided more than 1,300 breast cancer patients.

Early detection remains key to survival, West said. Advancements have improved doctors' ability to catch the tumors when they are at a curable stage.

“Yearly screening mammograms have shown to be most effective in women from age 50 to 70,” said West. “However, it is recommended that all women begin them at age 40.”