

Key Messages for Breast Cancer Awareness Month | October 2024

1. Why we must address breast cancer: Breast cancer is the most common cancer among women globally and represents approximately a quarter of all cancers that occur in women every year. With one in six cancer deaths in women worldwide, breast cancer is also the leading cause of cancer deaths among women globally.

2. Know your risks of developing breast cancer: the most common risk factors for most women around the world is increasing age, being obese, limited physical activity, alcohol use and using certain types of post-menopausal hormonal replacement. There are other established risk factors such as a history of previous radiation and risk factors that relate to a woman's choice to bear children and to breast feed. Only about 5-10% of breast cancers have a hereditary risk.

3. Actions to reduce breast cancer risks: Majority of breast cancers occurs in women with no specific risk factor apart from being female and increasing age. For women of all ages, it is important to be aware of changes in your breast and for those who are above 40 or 50 years old, a mammogram may be recommended in health care settings with adequate screening services.

4. Countries can reduce deaths caused by breast cancer: All countries should target to reduce breast cancer mortality by 2.5% per year to be on track to save 2.5 million lives by 2040. This is feasible by providing breast cancer services as part of the essential benefit package for universal health coverage and making them available in public facilities. The Global Breast Cancer Initiative lays down the framework to guide this.

5. Let's close the care gap: There is a 60% survival difference between woman with breast cancer living in high-income countries as compared to those living in low-and-middle income countries. Additionally, 70% of breast cancer deaths happen in resource-limited settings due to challenges in access to early detection, timely diagnosis and comprehensive treatment.

6. Continue talking about breast cancer: Advocate, contribute and act to empower and support those with breast cancer, no one should face breast cancer alone.

Moving from the framework to coordinated action for breast cancer

What individuals can do:

- **Adopting healthier lifestyles:** About one in four breast cancers can be prevented by modifying risk factors and adopting healthier lifestyle choices. The most important lifestyle choices to consider are to exercise regularly, to maintain a healthy weight and to avoid alcohol consumption. Recent studies have shown that maintaining a balanced diet and body weight can affect breast cancer risks for women 10, 20 or even 30 years later.
- **Breast awareness:** Healthy lifestyle choices are important but not enough alone. We must regularly look out for any breast abnormalities and seek medical advice with any concerns. This is known as breast awareness. Some women prefer to perform self-examinations. This can help. But the most important action is to be routinely monitoring our breast for any abnormality and reporting any concerns to your health care provider.

What people living with breast cancer and their families can do:

- **Seek early care:** The reason breast awareness is so important is because breast cancer is highly curable if detected in its early stages and adequate treatment is provided. Early care is better care.
- **Seek treatment completion:** You are best positioned for a successful outcome if you adhere to your treatments and complete your full schedule as prescribed by your healthcare provider. Breast cancer treatment can be daunting because it can require surgery, radiotherapy and systemic therapy. But completing treatment offers the best possibility of cure and survival. We know that addressing broader care needs like psycho-social, mental health and spiritual support, counselling, physical therapy and nutritional care can aid in treatment completion and improve outcomes. Receiving care from a multi-disciplinary team of healthcare providers is important to achieve these goals.

What Health Workers can do:

- **Help dispel stigma around breast cancer:** Health workers can help women to feel empowered to seek the care they deserve with any breast complaint. Most breast lumps are not cancer. By providing information, knowledge and encouraging breast awareness they can help counter stigma and encourage women to seek services early.

- **Provide early diagnosis and care:** Health care workers can provide early, timely diagnosis and comprehensive treatment services in a way that is appropriate to their context and in a culturally sensitive manner.
- **Establish good communication:** Health care workers can establish good communication and build trust with their patients involving them in shared decision making throughout their treatment journey. By providing them with adequate information and supportive care they can help patients and their families to navigate through and complete their treatment.
- **Extend beyond medical support:** Provide supportive care including psychological and emotional support for those navigating a breast cancer diagnosis.
- **Become advocates:** Advocate for improved access to breast cancer care and participate in national dialogues and efforts to strengthen the national health systems capacity to deliver these services.

What Ministries of Health/policy makers can do:

- **Adapt WHO's The Global Breast Cancer Initiative (GBCI):** GBCI proposes that countries should aim to reduce mortality rates by 2.5% annually, by expanding access to early detection, timely diagnosis, and treatment services and including breast cancer as a part of universal health coverage.
- **Ensure breast cancer services are part of health benefit packages:** Include breast cancer in health benefit packages as part of universal health coverage, with a focus on early detection, timely diagnosis and comprehensive treatment as per the WHO expanded best buys (76th WHA).
- **Engage people with lived experience:** Create avenues to meaningfully engage people living with breast cancer or those with lived experience of breast cancer in policy discussions and health planning.
- **Encourage adoption of healthy lifestyles and provide access to services:** Develop policies that enable adoption of healthy lifestyles and strategies to dispel myths and reduce fear surrounding breast cancer, and counter misinformation. Empower women to take an active role in breast awareness and provide access to breast cancer services for early, timely diagnosis and treatment completion.

What Community Leaders and Advocates can do:

- **Raise awareness and educate the community:** Discuss about breast cancer in the community forums to dispel myths and fears and counter any misinformation about breast cancer, encourage women on breast awareness and educate women to feel empowered to consult with their health care providers regularly and in case there are any concerns.
- **Build support networks within communities:** Establish or strengthen community support networks that offer psychosocial, spiritual and mental health support to individuals and families affected by breast cancer.

What Development Partners can do:

- **Mobilize resources and investments:** advocate for and provide resources to support initiatives that strengthen breast cancer education, workforce development, research, and service delivery, among other priority areas, particularly in resource-constrained settings.
- **Support innovative solutions:** Invest in development and delivery of innovative evidence-based approaches to improve uptake of breast cancer services across the care continuum globally.

