

Health Essentials™

Your link to a healthier life

Fall 2009

The New Face of Cancer

As Christina Applegate learned, breast cancer can strike women at any age. Follow her lead in early detection.

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mammogram?

A full-page photograph of Christina Applegate. She is smiling and looking towards the camera. She has blonde, wavy hair and is wearing a white, sleeveless, high-necked dress with a large bow at the collar and a black belt. The background is a light-colored, patterned wallpaper.

By Stephanie R. Conner

PLAYING HER PART

Christina Applegate is known for many roles, but breast cancer survivor was the role of her lifetime

That's what friends are for

Have you been putting off scheduling your mammogram? Use the buddy system: Call your mother, sister or friend and schedule your appointments together. Reward yourselves with lunch and a manicure after!

We know her as the flighty, flirty and funny Kelly Bundy. As the feminist Veronica Corningstone opposite Will Ferrell's Ron Burgundy. And most recently as the amnesia-afflicted Samantha of ABC's comedy *Samantha Who*?

But today, we know Christina Applegate as more than a talented comedian. She's also a brave breast cancer survivor.

Applegate was diagnosed with breast cancer last year, and at age 36, it was shocking news to many. In the beginning of her journey, the young actress kept the startling news to herself.

"I went through five weeks of work without telling anyone that this was going on in my life," she told Oprah Winfrey last September. Then, it was time—time to let other women know they may be at risk.

Early Detection Is the Key

One in eight. It's a statistic many of us know—a woman's chance of having invasive breast cancer at some point in her life, according to the American Cancer Society (ACS). And even though breast cancer is the second most common type of cancer found in women (after skin cancer), the death rates are declining, likely as a result of early detection and improved medical treatment capabilities.

Annual mammograms lie at the heart of early detection.

"Since women have started getting mammograms, the death rate from breast cancer has gone down significantly," says Debbie Saslow, PhD, the director of breast and gynecological cancers for ACS. "Mammograms can detect breast cancer years before a physical exam or a self-exam."

Saslow adds that one of the most common reasons women cite for not getting their mammograms is that their doctor didn't recommend it. If you're over 40, she says, "demand one."

Understanding the Risk Factors

The risk factors for breast cancer range from genetics to lifestyle. Risk increases with age—in fact, about two in three women are 55 or older when they're diagnosed. Alcohol consumption, being overweight or obese, and a lack of exercise also contribute to

increased risk. To understand these and other risk factors that may affect you, visit the ACS website at cancer.org or talk to your doctor.

Genetics and family history are also part of a woman's risk. Women who have close blood relatives—especially a mother, sister or daughter—who've had breast cancer have a higher risk.

However, it's not just about risk factors, says Stephen Edge, MD, a member of the board of directors for the National Comprehensive Cancer Network and the chair of the Commission on Cancer of the American College of Surgeons. "In fact, most women with breast cancer don't have any definable high-risk factors," he says. "That's the reason screening is recommended for all women."

For women under 40 with no risk factors, a clinical breast exam should be part of a regular exam by your doctor at least every three years, the ACS recommends. And experts advise women to watch for changes in their breasts by doing a monthly self-exam.

Applegate says that as the daughter of a breast cancer survivor, she's had regular mammograms since age 30. And because of the denseness of her breasts, her doctor recommended an MRI as an extra precaution.

Cancer was found in one breast, and the best news of all was that it was found early.

The Next Step

Breast cancer treatment options are as unique and personal as the woman herself. In Applegate's case, a double mastectomy—the surgical removal of both breasts—and breast reconstruction made the most sense.

"I have taken a very progressive stance in the rest of my life," she told Winfrey. "For that, I'm really grateful."

But regardless of how a woman and her physician choose to treat the disease, the bottom line is early detection.

"We've got to have early detection, early screening, prevention," Applegate said on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. "Why I've come out is because I am a perfect example of early detection in that I'm not going to die from this disease."

Reducing Your Risk

There is no way to guarantee breast cancer prevention, but you can reduce your risk. Debbie Saslow, PhD, the director of breast and gynecological cancers for the American Cancer Society, recommends the following steps to lower your risk.

- Don't drink alcohol. Or at least, drink in moderation.
- Avoid weight gain. "I know how hard it is," she says, "but weight gain as an adult has a huge impact on many cancers, including breast cancer." Switch to a diet low in fat and high in fiber.
- Get your exercise. Aim for 60 to 90 minutes a day to help reduce the risk of breast cancer, Saslow says.
- Avoid hormone therapy. If that's not possible, request the lowest dose for the shortest time, she says.