

Rethinking Breast Health

When I see a pink ribbon on a bumper, lapel or product I am filled with fear and loathing. This is sometimes difficult to explain, as most people display them nobly, confident that they have paid something towards breast cancer research in order to find a cure for this dreaded disease. After all, current Canadian statistics say that one in nine women will develop breast cancer. That instills me with fear, despite my sensible nature.

What if we challenged the way we think about this and with the challenge threw in a little militancy? I propose that we stop looking so hard for a cure and begin questioning the source of the various causes. This is where the loathing comes in because cancer is a hugely profitable business. Cancer patients help to earn those profits for pharmaceutical companies. Buying a pink ribbon product often means a contribution of mere pennies per product going towards research. Given the profits at stake, a once-and-for-all cure is highly unlikely. There's simply too much money to be made.

The Pink and Green Ribbon campaign is a new initiative that began in Alberta two years ago. It aims to teach us about our intimate connection to the environment. If our immediate environment is unhealthy we can't possibly keep ourselves well. Though having an effect on the global environment seems a mammoth task, there are steps we can take to keep our every day spaces healthy, including our soil, air, water and our homes.

How much militancy will that require? An unfortunately large amount, I fear, from selective buying to demanding governmental change. Finding food that is organic is only part of the soil equation. More and more we need to advocate for sensible farming practices, a reduction of the use of chemical fertilizers, insecticides, herbicides and hormones that we ingest along with our food. Pesticides contain many hormone mimics which accumulate in the body. Advocating for pesticide bans at the city and regional level is important, so that we and our children do not have to touch or breathe these poisons. You can grow your own organic vegetables - well, as long as all of your neighbours are pesticide free.

What goes into the soil comes out in the water table. Water is such a contentious issue lately, as well as the plastic that usually contains it. Tap water, we are urged to believe is "safe" and "clean". What this means is that it has been disinfected with chlorine and is devoid of viruses and bacteria. It does not address pharmaceutical accumulation and personal care products that are surfacing in the water table. We are urged not to flush old medications because it ends up in the water table, but what happens to them when we ingest them and then pee? Synthetic hormones are accumulating in the water table in this way too.

Nano-filtration and reverse osmosis systems are highly recommended and remove chlorine and disinfection by-products. Among these byproducts are trihalomethanes (THMs), which have been associated with bladder and colorectal cancer in humans. Drinking distilled water is not recommended, however, as it acidifies and de-mineralizes the body. (It can be used short term for detoxification because of this).

Good air starts in the home and office. Plants give off oxygen and take in carbon dioxide. Having a healthy amount of plants around us, inside and outside, means our own breathing is enhanced. Commercial air "fresheners" should be abandoned in favour of safer sprays mixed from essential oils and water or vinegar. Create your own aroma therapy spray from your favourite fragrant oils and save your lungs from chemical propellants and substances. Bringing in fresh evergreen boughs in winter adds subtle, long lasting fragrance. Throw out chemical cleaners and replace them with vinegar, baking soda and natural cleaners. Chemical cleaners off-gas under the sink, even when you are not using them. My favourite sink cleaner is a squirt of toothpaste on the rough side of the sponge. While toothpaste may not be the most "natural" substance, it does a great job on porcelain and jewellery. It's easier to use than straight baking soda because of the lubricant and detergent content.

Minimize your exposure to xenoestrogens. These are known as estrogen impostors or mimics,

(*xeno* means foreign) and are hormone disrupters. The body can't tell the difference between a chemical, man-made estrogen and the body's own. Xenoestrogens bind strongly to the body's estrogen receptors and overstay their welcome, as our bodies don't have efficient ways to eliminate them. They tend to accumulate in the fatty tissues, including the breast, exposing us long term to higher than necessary levels of estrogen. Synthetic estrogens are found in birth control pills, fertility drugs, hormone replacements and the hormones in meat and dairy. They are also found in plastic containers and wrap, cleaning supplies, herbicides, pesticides and some detergents. Remember what is buried in the dump and flushed down the toilet makes a huge difference to what re-emerges in our vegetables and drinking water. Switch to glass, porcelain, stainless and wood for your containers and ditch as much plastic as you can. To rid your body of accumulations, there are detoxification methods. Follow your naturopath's advice.

Be careful what you smear on your skin, especially the upper body. Parabens are antimicrobial preservatives that keep cosmetic preparations fresh. British oncologist Phillipa Darbre found that parabens were found intact in breast cancer tumors, indicating that they had not been digested by the body but absorbed through the skin. This does not prove that they were the cause of the cancers, but that they were present in 18 of the 20 tumors studied. Likely culprits include deodorants and antiperspirants, body creams and sprays. Parabens have also been found to have estrogen-like activity in mice, rats and human breast cancer cells in the lab. What to use? Find products with minimal paraben content, make your own, use natural oils for moisturizers, try hand sanitizer for deodorant (alcohol is the first ingredient in most of them anyway). Darbre also found that 60% of tumors occurred in one fifth of the breast, the upper-outer quadrant, nearest the armpit. What goes into this area is therefore very important.

Eat your fruits and veggies, get some sun (vitamin D is a big cancer killer), exercise consistently, get enough sleep. All the things your Mom taught you are valid for cancer risk reduction. Changing our personal environments will go a long way to protecting against cancer-causing agents. Advocating with your city, municipality and province for pesticide bans, cleaner water ways and real, natural green spaces is also important. Squabbling over emission reductions is really pointless if we don't link them closely with our own health.

Finally, reducing stress and fear in our lives is extremely important. We live in a society where we are bombarded with messages, information (much of which is not useful anyway), radio waves, light, colour, sound and the hectic pace of life. Somehow we must learn to take breaks from this mayhem and get some quiet. Stress reduction techniques are not only important for sanity of the mind, but also for the body. Much of what we feel in the mind is experienced chemically and hormonally in the body. You've heard of psycho-somatic illnesses. Usually people use this phrase to indicate that it's "all in your head". The truth, though, is closer to "it starts in your head and ends up in your body". Almost everything we experience is psycho-somatic, or mind-body. Revolutionizing how we think about our bodies quite possibly results in how the body responds.

There are three broad rules of thumb you can follow: If you can't pronounce it, don't eat it. If you wouldn't eat it, don't put it on your skin. If it would harm your skin, don't clean with it.

If it is true that one in nine women will get breast cancer, then it is also true that eight in nine women will have healthy breasts for their life time. Eight in nine. This is what we need to celebrate, and cling to as our hope. Take sensible approaches to how you live, eat, breathe, feel and what touches your body and your mind.

References:

Journal of Exposure Analysis and Environmental Epidemiology (2000) **10**, 321–326.
<http://www.pinkandgreenribbon.com/>