

CarrollwoodPatch

NEWS

Health Watch: Local Woman Copes with Ovarian Cancer

Early diagnosis is key, doctor warns

By Deb Kelley 2:00pm

A regal-looking woman with straight brown hair is standing at the coffee shop's counter in jeans and a teal top, awaiting her order at Starbucks.

She looks no different than anyone else in the room in need of a caffeine fix. No one can tell Linda Kraft's secret, which she doesn't bear alone.

Kraft, 47, is an ovarian cancer survivor. Like the teal bracelet with the ovarian cancer ribbon charm that dangles from her wrist, she wears that badge with pride. She is the less than 20 percent statistic that beat the odds.

"I am a typical ovarian cancer patient just because I ignored the symptoms for nine months," she said. "I just thought I was going through menopause."

The numbers are staggering. In the United States alone, 21,000 women are diagnosed with ovarian cancer and 15,000 will die of the disease. Like prostate cancer for men, this is the "silent killer" in women. As the symptoms are minimal, none specific or symptoms easily misdiagnosed, nearly 80 percent of ovarian cancer patients are diagnosed in an advanced stage.

Kraft was a patient of Dr. Sachin Apte at Moffitt Cancer Center. Apte, a gynecologic oncologist at Moffitt Cancer Center, explained that symptoms are often vague.

"(They) may start with nausea, change in bowel habits, bladder habits, heartburn, unintended weight loss, abdominal pain or distention, abnormal vaginal bleeding, discharge and blood in stool," he said. "I've had patients referred from findings of an annual exam. The patients had very few or even zero symptoms."

Often times, he said, once patients are diagnosed with an advanced cancer, they displayed symptoms for a long period of time.

Kraft said she chalked her symptoms - bloating, exhaustion, back pain and frequent urination - up to her age.

A severe pain attack that lasted 45 minutes forced Kraft to go to her doctor. She was diagnosed early.

Linda did not fit the profile expected of someone with ovarian cancer. She was pre-menopausal. She had two adult children. She was on birth control pills and she had no family history of the disease.

Linda's general practitioner had a cat scan performed.

"The cat scan showed my suspicious ovaries," Kraft said.

That led to an ultrasound one morning. That afternoon, she got a call from her doctor. Kraft was going to have to have surgery.

"I went in at 7:30 in the morning, and when I woke up, it was 330 in the afternoon," Kraft said. "Though I was drugged, I remember two things: Dr. Apte saying it was ovarian cancer and that they thought they caught it early."

Her initial reaction to her diagnosis was a simple question. "Ok now what do I do? Then you move forward and we did. It was a very emotional time."

Friends and family rallied around Linda during her treatments.

"Your world shrinks so much," she said. "You focus on staying positive - your faith, family and friends. The rest is not important. I went through all six chemo and I'm feeling good now. It's been two years since my diagnosis."

Though Linda celebrated her "cancer-versary" on March 24, where she had her last treatment, catscan, and was cleared, she will never be considered cancer-free.

"I will continue to be tested for the rest of my life," she said.

Though there are no steadfast ways to prevent ovarian cancer, Dr. Apte recommends that the best way to access your risk is to sit down with your doctor and discuss your concerns.

"We believe 10 percent of ovarian cancer is hereditary in nature, and 90 percent sporadic, meaning it just happens," he said. "Years from now, we will probably have a much better understanding of it."

"Oral contraceptive pills can reduce your risk of developing ovarian cancer," he said. "In some high-risk patients, we remove the ovaries."

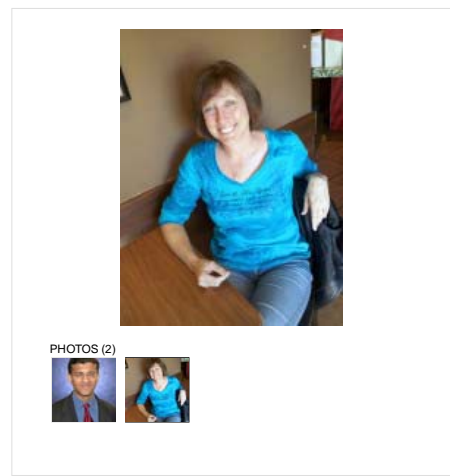
But, Apte warns, ovarian cancer can only be diagnosed with surgery.

Kraft participates in Ovacomme, a gynecologic cancer support group that meets monthly at St. Joseph's Hospital. Ovacomme offers patients, survivors and caregivers an outlet to find hope, encouragement, and one-on-one cancer support.

"To have the women who have walked in your shoes, who can lift each other up, laugh and help each other through the rough times, is so important."

She now volunteers at the Center for Women's Oncology at Moffitt.

"Ovarian cancer shook things up and put it in perspective," Kraft said. "It put purpose in my life to go out and help other women to be here as a model, just to be here, for other women to see."



PHOTOS (2)



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