

My Quest to 'Help the Hoo-Hahs'

Written by Elizabeth Malphrus

Tuesday, 13 September 2011 09:51 - Last Updated Tuesday, 13 September 2011 12:25



When I tell people I've created a non-profit organization called ***Help the Hoo-Hahs***, there is inevitably that look of confusion, followed by questions. I chose the word

Hoo-Hahs

as a broad term to describe that area

below the belt

for women. Let's face it, most people aren't comfortable using anatomically correct terms like *ovarian*

or

cervical

, and certainly not

vaginal

. Then go and add the word

cancer

and you've really made people uncomfortable. However, the harsh reality is, every 7 seconds a woman is diagnosed with a gynecological cancer. More than 90,000 women will be diagnosed this year and more than 22,000 will die.

Those statistics really hit home for my family in the Fall of 2010 when my Mother and I were both diagnosed with a GYN cancer within two months of each other. My Mother's symptoms started out pretty vague. She had significant abdominal bloating and didn't feel like eating. This got worse, as did the pain in her pelvis. She saw numerous physicians but kept being reassured it was likely nothing serious. Her symptoms didn't go away and finally, out of sheer frustration, I insisted she see a specialist at a larger university hospital. Within three days, she was

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diagnosed with stage III primary peritoneal cancer, which is essentially a “relative” of ovarian cancer and has the same treatment and poor prognosis.

As our family was struggling to recover from her surgery and preparing for the start of chemotherapy, my annually scheduled GYN visit came around. I almost cancelled the appointment because I was overwhelmed with my Mom’s medical issues. I had also had 17 years of normal PAP screens and felt like it wasn’t a priority. However, I’ve always been an advocate of preventative medicine and thankfully kept the appointment. A week later I got the call that the screen was abnormal, which led to more testing and procedures. On the Monday after Thanksgiving, I got the final call- I had invasive cervical cancer.

To say this came as a total shock is an understatement. I was 33 years old, exercised 4-5 days a week, and felt like I was in the best shape of my life. I knew that women are typically found to have abnormal cells before it ends up as invasive cancer, so how could I have cancer? The answer is that although the PAP test is a great screening tool, it isn’t perfect. This is why it is so important to have screening every year.

In the end, I had a radical hysterectomy with additional removal of my ovaries. I was fortunate enough to have the surgery through the new DaVinci robotic surgical system, which cut my recovery time from 6-8 weeks (with standard open surgery) to 4 weeks. I’ll admit, it was devastating to have the option of having more children taken away and the realization that I would need to be on hormone replacement for many years. There was also something quite disturbing about all those uniquely female organs being removed. Would I still feel the same after surgery? I never imagined being so young and facing these choices. However, I am thankful to have one healthy daughter and am now cancer free. Many women aren’t so lucky.

Screening, Testing and Prevention:

For ovarian cancer, you always hear that it is the *silent killer*. However, it’s really more of a *whispering killer*, and you need to know what to listen for! For cervical cancer, the majority of cases are caused by human papilloma virus (HPV). More than 75% of women will be exposed to HPV in their

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lifetime and the types of HPV that cause cancer generally have no outward signs or symptoms. It is crucial for parents to have their daughters vaccinated by their teen years, as the HPV vaccine can prevent the majority of cervical cancer. Additionally, it is so important for all women to have a yearly visit with their gynecologist for a PAP screen and may benefit from HPV DNA testing. Most cervical cases can be caught early, when treatment is most effective and doesn't require life altering surgery or worse.

Warning Signs of Gynecological Cancer:*

- Persistent abdominal bloating

- Trouble eating or feeling full after only a small amount of food

- Urinary symptoms (urgency or frequency)

- Persistent pelvic or abdominal pain

- Pain during intercourse or unusual vaginal bleeding

*Although these symptoms can also be caused by other conditions, it is important to talk to your gynecologist if these symptoms last for two or more weeks

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Lessons Learned:

I've met so many women who admit they don't get their yearly exams as they should. Please let my story serve as a reminder. Just a quick appointment once a year may save not only your fertility but your life! Also, trust your body and know the warning signs. If you feel something is wrong and your symptoms don't improve, don't be afraid to get a second or third opinion. Even some physicians can miss the signs of a GYN cancer!

I think part of the problem is that we as a society don't really like discussing that area *down there*.

Overall, GYN cancers don't get the same public support and coverage as many other health issues, although they are a leading cause of death in women. My hope is that one day we'll be as comfortable talking about GYN cancers as we are about other types of cancer. After all, we all owe our life to a Hoo-Hah!

Helping others:

Not only is a cancer diagnosis one of the most painful emotional roller coasters you'll ever experience, it has a tremendous financial burden. I've watched as my Mom has battled insurance companies, was unable to work from the horrendous side effects of chemotherapy, and faced an ever mounting stack of medical bills. Even *if* you're fortunate enough to have insurance, there are so many additional expenses these families face.

In addition to our mission to bring education and awareness to GYN cancers, **Help the Hoo-Hahs** also provides support and financial assistance to women and families affected by cancer of the reproductive organs. We are providing gas/grocery gift cards, wigs to help women feel a little more *normal*, assistance with needed hereditary breast/ovarian cancer testing and help with completing a *bucket list* trip. Our ultimate goal is to be a global force in the battle against GYN cancers but for now, all

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proceeds stay local to help women in our area with tangible things they need.

How you can help:

5K Walk/Run

September 24, 2011 @ 8:00 am

Savannah Trade and Convention Center

For more information, to register online, or to make a tax-deductible donation, please visit www.helpthehooahs.com/coming-events.html

Please email

helpthehooahs@gmail.com

with any questions or check us out on Facebook! All of the proceeds from this event will stay in our community to help local women still battling a GYN cancer.