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Mammography Consultant Turns on Wit

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SOUTH BEND--Breasts don't have to be a taboo topic. Just ask Bonnie Rush.

"I'm not 44D, but they're beautiful and they're mine," the mammographer joked before about 150 Michiana women Wednesday. "And if you really think about it, the breast is only a modified sweat gland. Now don't tell men that."

Rush is a seasoned pro at putting women at ease about this part of their anatomy. She spends her days as a radiologic technologist at the University of California at San Diego, giving women mammograms. "You all know me as the great breast compressor," she quipped.

But Rush returned to a serious message between her constant cracks: Breast cancer can strike anyone. So keeping your breasts healthy is literally a lifesaver.

"When it comes right down to it, 80 percent of women who develop breast cancer have no risk factors," such as age and family history, she said. "So we're all at risk."

Rush was invited to speak at the University of Notre Dame as part of Angels Night Out, a local event to raise awareness about breast cancer. Rush used balloons and comical drawings to teach the art of breast self-examination.

"If you're not comfortable doing it, have your significant other do it," she said with a grin.

Actually, that's not a bad idea, she added earnestly. "I cannot tell you how many times women come in for a mammogram stating that it was their significant other that found something and wanted them to get it checked out," she said.

Rush, a mammography consultant who speaks across the country, noted that many women have an extreme fear of mammograms. The thought of a paddle compressing the breast is not an appealing one, she acknowledged.

But the procedure will not crush the breast, she said. It's like "the cupcake test," she added: "When you bounce back, I'm done."

"Compression is uncomfortable," she said. "But if you do not go right before your menstrual cycle, it should not be as painful as wearing a tight pair of jeans. Or eating a big meal while wearing a girdle."

Amid the laughter, Rush delivered some startling facts. At age 20, only one in 2,500 women will develop breast cancer, but by age 60, one in 29 will. Overall, one in nine women will fall victim to the disease in their lifetimes.

But there are high hopes these days for beating the disease. First, women can focus on prevention with a healthy diet. Go heavy on fiber, soybeans and vegetables such as cauliflower, brussels sprouts and broccoli, Rush said. And cap your fat intake at 20 percent of your daily diet.

Also, women should use exercise, meditation and laughter to decrease stress. Monthly breast exams are also important, and it's pretty easy to get the hang of them, Rush said.

"I equate it with driving," she said. "As you 'drive' over your breasts (regularly), they become familiar to you."

Lumps, for example, are normal for women with fibrocystic breast disease. However, after about three monthly self-exams, most women will be familiar enough with their breasts to know if a new lump has appeared.

If you find one, don't panic, Rush advised.

"If it feels like a marshmallow, then it is not worrisome," she said. "If it's like a pea -- hard, fixed in place, it does not move -- it may still be nothing. But you need to see your health care practitioner."

Self-exams should be done after the menstrual cycle, not before, when harmless cysts in the breasts can swell, Rush said. And a visual inspection is important too, checking for puckering, nipple discharge or other changes.

Since 70 percent to 80 percent of new lumps are found by women themselves, self-exams are critical, Rush said. But she admitted she finds her own exams depressing as the years pass: "The times, they are a'changin'," she said, grimacing.

Finally, yearly mammograms after age 40 are also critical. "There are times when mammograms will show up something that you cannot feel," she said. So don't be mean to the radiologist, she added.

And if you find the mammogram stressful, remember to keep a sense of humor. For example, as Rush sometimes likes to do, you might picture what the world would be like if men had breasts. Said she: "Sagging breasts would be thought of as a sign of wisdom and success."