Long search for prevention

For 11 years, researchers at CSU have been studying how certain habits affect women at high risk of developing breast cancer

By Karen Augé
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In a lab on the Colorado State University campus, half a dozen physicians, nutritionists and biologists have, over the past 11 years, quietly been working to figure out whether your mom was right about eating those vegetables. So far, it looks as though Mom might have been on to something, at least when it comes to breast cancer. Since 1993, researchers have been recruiting, examining, questioning and testing women with a family history of the disease or some other trait that landed them in the “high risk” breast cancer category. The goal of the program, called Breast Watch, is to see how those risk factors contribute to actual cancer growth and explore ways to prevent breast cancer. Breast Watch itself doesn’t get funding. But every so often, a grant arrives that provides the money to try to answer a question about what makes the risk go up or down.

Researchers have studied the impact of fruit and vegetable intake and plan to look at the effectiveness of various diets. At the moment, the group is studying whether the supplement selenium can help reduce cancer risk, said Henry J. Thompson, director of CSU’s Cancer Prevention Lab, and principle investigator for Breast Watch. That is being done with a grant from the Department of Defense.

“The idea was that it would be useful to have a program that would have at-risk women enrolled not only to be followed but offered the opportunity to participate in studies designed for women of high-risk status,” Thompson said.

In her obstetrics and gynecology practice, Boulder physician, Dr. Ruth Oratz sees a lot of high-risk women, and like her colleagues in the practice, she often asks patients if they would be interested in furthering the cause of science, while at the same time enjoying the benefit of having a team of researchers closely watch their breast health.

Once a woman agrees, researchers will grill her — about her family and history, what she eats, what vitamins she takes and what she drinks. The Women provide blood, urine and breast-fluid samples to be analyzed and studied. They undergo regular mammograms or other diagnostic tests.

Since its inception in 1993, Breast Watch has collected 645 patients, and continues to follow several hundred of them, according to Becky Meinecke, study coordinator. Researchers measure “tumor markers” of women in the selenium study. Those are cell changes and proteins that scientists believe may signal cancer growth.

The study is ongoing and needs more participants, Oratz said. But having hundreds of high-risk women available has “been a wonderful resource” for putting prevention research on the fast track, Thompson said.

For more information about Breast Watch, call 303-321-0302