Breast Cancer Awareness Month

By Chef Jen, RDN/LDN, RYT-200, Breast Cancer Survivor

I went for my first mammogram on February 23, 2017, 2 days later, on a Friday, I received a call to come back for more imaging. I really didn't think much of it because I have dense breast tissue (aka lumpy feeling breasts). When Sunday rolled around, I remembered that I had to go back and I decided to do a self exam so that I can tell that what feels normal and what doesn't. That's when I found the lump. It was big, it was obvious and it was NOT normal. That began ~2 weeks of worry/try not to worry before I went and had my ultrasound where after I had an MRI and then came the biopsies. Test after test, procedure after procedure…. I knew when I felt that lump that it was cancer. What I didn't know is that I had 5 tumors growing in the one breast. In the end, some were malignant, some were benign and the other was too small to even get a biopsy done on it. I ended up with a right mastectomy and 4 rounds of chemo. March 17, 2017 was my official diagnosis day and then in October 2017, I was declared free of disease. Pretty appropriate, since it's breast cancer awareness month!

I am not telling you this story to scare you away from getting a mammogram, I'm telling you this because you need to be AWARE. I had no symptoms, pain, signs, leakage (gross), no genetic history and no pre-existing conditions that would allude to a higher risk of cancer.

I can't say these sentences enough times:

LADIES--- GET YOUR MAMMOGRAM AT 40 and then continue to get one EVERY YEAR AFTER!

I went and got my mammogram done at 40 out of due diligence, so should you and your loved ones!

If you are UNDER 40: DO SELF EXAMS. Get to know what your breasts feel like so that you can tell the difference between density and an abnormal lump.

1 in 8 women will be diagnosed with breast cancer in the US each year. In 2017, I was diagnosed, the 2 other women I worked with, were as well. I have a friend who was done with her chemo in early 2017, only to find out that she was stage 4 a few months later. (That was just 2017!) I know of 2 other BHAN faculty members who've had breast cancer as well and I have a friend who was diagnosed this year. Bottom line: I know TOO MANY WOMEN who have been diagnosed. But guess what? Out of the 7 of us, 5 survived and 1 is living with metastatic breast cancer. My heart breaks every time I think of my friend that I lost, she was only 42. In 3 years, I know 5 other women who have had breast cancer- how crazy is that?! It's scary and becoming more common. THIS is why we need to make sure that we do the following:

eat well
move our bodies
pay attention to our bodies
donate to breast cancer research
encourage all women to do self exams and get their mammograms.
(FYI- there is a small instance of men who develop breast cancer as well. When I was in for one of my biopsies, I sat with a woman who was waiting for her husband's biopsy to finish. He came from a family that had a VERY strong instance of breast cancer. Men aren't immune to this either.)

There are so many resources available. For example:

- Are you uncertain on how to do a self exam? Follow this link:
  https://www.nationalbreastcancer.org/breast-self-exam

For Delaware specifically:

- If you are newly diagnosed or are a survivor, follow this link:
  https://www.debreastcancer.org/
- If you are a woman of color, have cancer or are a survivor, check out Delaware Breast Cancer Coalition's My Sister's Keeper page; they also have a Young Survivor’s group as well!

As I am writing this, I am preparing for a trip to Chicago, where my oncologist is based at Cancer Treatment Centers of America. It's a long story as to why I chose to travel to Chicago for my treatment, but to sum it up, I just knew that it was where I needed to be. People always ask me this so, I'll let you know--yes: they fly me out there for each of my visits. This visit is my annual follow-up post breast cancer. I love going at this time of year, because O'Hare Airport looks like this:
Each time I arrive there I'm reminded of the fact that I fought this beast and won. I'm also reminded of those we have lost. I'm filled with a sense of pride and purpose to tell my story so that other lives won't be lost. Cancer is life changing but it doesn't have to be life ending. That's why getting your mammograms done every year is so important! Even if you don't have history or anything else- get it done. I'm living proof as to why.

Be well, eat well, walk your dog and Bon Appetit!

~~ Chef Jen