

Editor's note: The following is an editorial submitted by Nancy Alexander, wife of U.S. Rep. Rodney Alexander, R-Quitman. Mrs. Alexander is a member of the Congressional Families Action for Cancer Awareness.

It's that appointment with your doctor you keep putting off, that exam with your doctor you just don't want to have, and you rationalize it by saying, "It won't happen to me." But the fact is that all women are at risk for breast cancer, and living in denial or not getting screened only increases that risk.

I'll admit - I used to have a similar attitude. But as I've met more people who have been affected by the disease, I've made a concerted effort to learn more about breast cancer. It is important to know that when found and treated early before it spreads, the five-year survival rate for breast cancer is 98 percent.

In the state of Louisiana, 3,870 new breast cancer cases are estimated to be diagnosed in 2005. Nationwide, more than 211,240 women will be diagnosed with breast cancer, and approximately 40,410 women will lose their lives from the disease this year.

Right now, there are slightly over two million women living in the U.S. who have been treated for breast cancer. The good news is that breast cancer death rates are going down. This decline is probably the result of earlier detection and improved treatment, the benefits of research, education and awareness.

We can all do our part in further reducing the incidence of breast cancer by knowing our risk, getting screened, and talking with our family, friends and loved ones about prevention. To help recognize the importance of an open dialogue, I would like to take this opportunity to share some tips on prevention and early detection with my friends and neighbors.

Aside from skin cancer, breast cancer is the most frequently diagnosed cancer in women in America; however, early detection and prompt treatment can significantly reduce the suffering and deaths caused by this disease.

The combination of monthly breast self-exams, yearly clinical breast exams, and regular mammograms beginning at age 40 is the best way to detect breast cancer in its earliest and most treatable stages.

**Breast Self-Exam (BSE):** Every woman should examine her breasts once a month to check for physical changes. If you are unsure of how to perform a breast self-exam, ask your health care provider to demonstrate and explain the ideal time to conduct one. It is very important for women to become familiar with their breasts and understand what feels normal. Start early, beginning at age 20.

**Clinical Breast Exam (CBE):** Be sure to ask your health care provider to give you a clinical breast exam each year. The exam consists of checking the breasts for any changes, lumps, or other possible warning signs of breast cancer through physical touch and appearance. You should begin having clinical breast exams in your 20's and 30's.

**Mammography:** Beginning at age 40, all women should have an annual mammogram. It is a good idea to have a baseline mammogram at age 35. The mammogram is an "x-ray" of the breast and is the most effective method of detecting breast changes that may be cancer, long before physical symptoms can be seen or felt.

It is also important to know that while all men and women are at risk, some women are at a high risk. What groups are these? Age itself is a

risk factor for breast cancer, of which many women are not aware. About 77 percent of the women diagnosed are over the age of 50. Also at high risk are women with a family history of breast cancer are high risk, women with inherited abnormal genes, women who have previously had cancer in one breast, and obese women with sedentary lifestyles.

Breast cancer is often detected in its earliest stage as an abnormality on a mammogram before it can be felt by a woman or by her health care provider. The following may occur when a cancer has grown to the point where physical signs and symptoms are present: breast lump or thickening; swelling, redness or tenderness; skin or nipple changes in color or texture; dimpling or puckering of the skin; nipple pain, discharge, scaliness or retraction; and, lumps under the armpit area. If you experience any of these symptoms, see your health care provider immediately.

Some other common sense prevention tips - that are appropriate beyond breast cancer as well - are to eat a low fat diet, exercise regularly, and not smoke. And if you suspect that you are at high risk for the disease, talk to your health care provider. With the strides being made in prevention, there are drugs available to help prevent breast cancer for the higher risk categories.

If you would like additional information on cancer prevention, please contact the Cancer Research and Prevention Foundation at 1-800-227-CRFA or visit the web site at [www.preventcancer.org](http://www.preventcancer.org) <http://www.preventcancer.org/>.

*Nancy Alexander PhD is the spouse of US Representative Rodney Alexander(LA - 5th District) and is a member of Congressional Families Action for Cancer Awareness, a program of the Cancer Research and Prevention Foundation.*