

It's important to listen to your body

By Lourdes Carini

Earlier this year, my entire world turned upside down.

I've always been healthy and full of energy. To stay that way, I did the things you know you should do as a woman. I performed monthly breast self-exams like clockwork. I scheduled my annual pap smear and breast exam to coincide with Mother's Day – a time of year I chose to commemorate my commitment to my children to live a healthy life.

Last year, I started experiencing abdominal pain. It was the kind you initially brush off as insignificant – just a twinge, that's all, nothing to see here. I was a tad bloated, but I shrugged it off as indigestion. And I was tired, but I'd been burning the candle at both ends in my sales job and chasing my grandchildren (and great-grandchildren!).

But the pain got progressively worse. The bloating became more severe and pronounced. And my afternoon catnaps turned hours-long. I knew something was wrong, but I never imagined

the worst. After all, I was doing all the things you're supposed to do.

You can imagine my surprise when my doctor told me, rather unceremoniously, that I had a large ovarian mass and it needed to be removed immediately. This cannot be, I thought to myself. If I hadn't already had my appendix out, I would have thought it was to blame.

Once I collected myself, I leapt into action and made an appointment at Cancer Treatment Centers of America, where they assembled a first-rate care team led by gynecologic oncologist Dr. Natalie Godbee. The minute I walked into the hospital and met my team, I knew it was exactly where God wanted me; every person who works there projects hope and peace. Earlier this summer, Dr. Godbee performed a complete hysterectomy, and since then, I've been through close to 30 rounds of chemo.

Gynecologic cancer is a silent killer. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than

95,000 women are diagnosed with some form of gynecologic cancer (which includes cervical, ovarian, uterine, vaginal and vulvar cancers) each year. More than 30,000 women will die of one of these cancers each year. And because these cancers are frequently detected late (in stages 3 or 4), they are often deadly.

This has been a difficult journey, to be sure. But it's ignited a fierce determination within me to spread a message of prevention. Here's what I wish I'd known: relying on your annual physical or OB/GYN visit just isn't enough. You must listen to your body – and more importantly, you must communicate what's normal (and what isn't) to your treating physicians.

As we kick off Gynecologic Cancer Awareness Month in September, my charge to women of all ages is simple: get in tune with your body. Know when something is different – and let your doctor know. If you're feeling increasingly nauseous, experiencing frequent vomiting, or noticing bloating or changes in bowel and urinary habits, tell your doctor.

My oncologist, Dr. Godbee, tells her patients to keep a calendar tracking the type and timing of symptoms so they can better assess whether what they're



Cancer patient Lourdes Carini relied on the efforts of Cancer Treatment Centers of America gynecological oncologist Dr. Natalie Godbee to help fight the disease. (Photo courtesy Lourdes Carini)

experiencing is related to menstruation or ovulation – or a sign of something more serious. If you're having persistent symptoms of any kind for several weeks, call your doctor immediately. And if you have a family history of breast or ovarian cancers, consider genetic testing to determine if you have inherited changes to the BRCA1 or BRCA2 genes, which can raise your risk.

"Listen to your bodies. Know the warning signs. And speak up!" Dr. Godbee always says. She's absolutely right. In the fight against gynecologic cancers, you are your own best advocate.

Lourdes Carini is a banking, management and sales executive. She received treatment at Cancer Treatment Centers of America in Goodyear. ■

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