

Katie Johnson: Good morning and welcome to "Apple a Day", Lake Region Healthcare's health and wellness program, where we feature news and information you can use to live a healthier life. I am Katie Johnson, your host, and my guest today is Dr. Wade Swenson. He is an oncologist at Lake Region Healthcare's Cancer Care and Research Center and he's joining us for Breast Cancer Awareness month to dive a little into the breast cancer topic. Good morning, Dr. Swenson.

Dr. Wade Swenson: Good morning. Thank you for having me.

Katie Johnson: Well, thanks for joining us. As I mentioned, it's Breast Cancer Awareness month and it certainly gets a lot more attention in October and, in general, I think, is getting a lot more attention than other types of cancer out there. Let's put it in perspective, how common is breast cancer?

Dr. Wade Swenson: It is one of the most common cancers, the most common cancer that will women will get. It's about 1 in every 8 women will have a diagnosis of breast cancer at some time in their life. It's common, it affects people, and I think that's probably why it has so much awareness. October, of course, is a busy month and people are made aware of it in October, but it's probably the most common cancer that we deal with here at the Cancer Center and it affects many people.

Katie Johnson: When you say 1 in 8, that really does put into some perspective, that it is prevalent, and probably deserves the kind of attention that it gets. We've heard recently that the National Institutes of Health is putting some special emphasis on what we can do to prevent breast cancer. Why do you think they're using that approach?

Dr. Wade Swenson: Well, partially because it is so common. Breast cancer prevention is difficult, there's not an association like there is with lung cancer, with smoking, there's not a single behavioral change that can really make a big difference. But prevention is important, just because it's such a common cancer. We do know that genetics plays a big part of this, and so there's a lot of emphasis that they're putting in to the study of genetics to see what other factors out there may be contributing, but there are other relationships that they're finding that we might be able to change, personally, that might decrease risks of breast cancer.

Katie Johnson: So you mentioned genetics, what are, outside of genetics, some of the other risk factors involved with breast cancer?

Dr. Wade Swenson: There's been a lot of study and there are some associations that are someone questionable, but there are some that are definitely, they've been established and some of those are alcohol, alcohol in higher rates is associated with increased risk of breast cancer. We do know, of course, the genetic risk, and aging is probably the biggest risk factor. Somebody in their 30's versus somebody in their 70's, women in their 70's have about a 20 fold increase in breast cancer risk or higher. Outside of the alcohol, there is an association with obesity. Diet is

not really clear, but there definitely is an association with obesity. There have been studies that look at women who have had a diagnosis of breast cancer and a low fat diet does decrease that chance of that cancer coming back, but that study's not been really shown in the preventive sense for people who have not been diagnosed yet, but obesity is a risk factor.

Katie Johnson: Let's go back to genes for a second and we'll come back to some of those other risk factors and prevention strategies. The BRCA, or BRCA1 and BRCA2, have been in the news. I think most people are familiar with them having a strong link to breast cancer. Have they determined that the presence of this gene almost guarantees you'll develop cancer? Or what's the status on that?

Dr.Wade Swenson: No, it definitely increases the risk, and so the statistic that's most commonly out there is up to age 70. BRCA1 and BRCA2, the lifetime risk of developing breast cancer, up to about age 70, is in the range of 45 to 70%, and so the majority of people with that gene mutation will develop breast cancer. So there are a lot of steps that are taken to help prevent that from happening.

Katie Johnson: In those cases, are women still opting for preventive mastectomies, or what are the advantages and disadvantages to that approach when you have that gene?

Dr.Wade Swenson: That does happen commonly. Prophylactic mastectomies is probably the most common step that is taken. When we don't do that, then we need to keep a closer eye on screening, so we'll do MRIs instead of mammograms. They've been shown to be an effective way to keep an eye on the development of cancer and catch it early if we do find it. There are other steps, for example, medications that can be taken, but this is really not used too often in this setting. Usually, it's close surveillance and prophylactic mastectomies.

Katie Johnson: I think what I'm hearing as a takeaway from this is that you do want to know if you have the gene. It's not a for sure diagnosis, just because you have the gene, but you want to know so that you can take those measures to monitor it more closely.

Dr.Wade Swenson: That's right. It's not just breast cancer. With the BRCA1, especially, there's a risk of ovarian cancer, but it's also helpful for family members and it's certainly not a guarantee, it's not a death sentence, it is information and the information is helpful, not only for the patient, but the patient's family.

Katie Johnson: For sure. We also hear that those with dense breast tissue also have a higher risk for cancer. What does that term mean and is that really the case?

Dr.Wade Swenson: Yeah, it is. It's a radiographic term. So dense breasts is something that we can determine by mammography and we can't really predict it any other way. It has to do with the amount of fat versus the amount of other tissue in the breast, and the less fat, the more dense. There's two things of importance with this. Women who have dense breasts tend to develop cancers that are more difficult to identify because of the dense breasts, so mammography is not as effective with

dense breasts. There also is an increased risk, it's not a particularly high risk, but it's also an increased risk for developing cancer for women with dense breasts and that's thought to be because there's more tissue in that breast that has a potential to develop cancer.

Katie Johnson: So we talked a little bit about factors that can decrease your risk of breast cancer. You mentioned some lifestyle changes, what you eat. Tell us a little bit more what the current thought is on those facts that might be in our control in terms of prevention.

Dr.Wade Swenson: Some of the biggest things are things to avoid, like alcohol, and decreased alcohol intake can decrease the risk of breast cancer. Exercise is something that's been shown to decrease the risk of breast cancer from about 20 to 30%. When it comes to obesity and, of course, that's related to exercise, obesity increases the risk of breast cancer. So these are all things that can be managed, things that can be changed, lifestyle changes that can take place to decrease the risk of breast cancer.

Katie Johnson: You mentioned diet earlier and that the studies are a little bit inconclusive in terms of how much of a correlation there is between what you eat and your risk for breast cancer. Is there any consensus on what type of diet might be best for prevention?

Dr.Wade Swenson: There's a lot of thought out there, but I don't think there's anything that definitive, as far as the science backing it up. In general, recommendations are low to moderate fat diets, balanced diet, and there are foods that, in general, decrease risks of cancer. They tend to be the green leafy vegetables and that type of food. But I don't know if there's anything that we can say, based on reproducible science, that there's a definite association with decreased breast cancer risk and that diet. But, in general, a well balanced diet is probably the best recommendation.

Katie Johnson: And so many of the things are so many of the same things we saw about so many of the diseases we talk about on this program, so there's certainly that theme of balanced diet, low fat diet, getting your exercise. Sometimes I feel like we're a broken record, but it just points to, time and time again, our health is so much more in our hands that I think we've thought in the past.

Dr.Wade Swenson: Yep, I totally agree. I think that the emphasis on prevention and general health is something that we've known for decades, but I think now it's just more appropriate, more important than ever.

Katie Johnson: Absolutely. So, closing up the program today, can you come up with maybe one important thing you would tell women that they can do to prevent breast cancer?

Dr.Wade Swenson: Based on the science, exercise. There are certainly the lifestyle changes, that helps not only breast cancer, but that will help in so many other disease states.

Katie Johnson: Exercise, once again, comes to the top of the list, and a beautiful fall week we're experiencing, no reason not to get outside and do a little extra moving. Thank you, Dr. Swenson, for sharing your knowledge and expertise and advise with us this morning during Breast Cancer Awareness month.

Dr.Wade Swenson: You're welcome. Thank you very much having me.

Katie Johnson: Dr. Wade Swenson, oncologist at Lake Region Healthcare's Cancer Care and Research Center, my guest today on "Apple a Day". Dr. Swenson and I both remind you there is so much to do here, stay healthy for it. Have a great day.