

Avoiding Hidden Carcinogenic Dangers

By **Jacqueline Harounian** - April 13, 2018

Temple Israel of Great Neck hosted an eye-opening presentation on the many hidden and dangerous toxins present in our homes and the environment.

Sisterhood President Karen Ashkenase introduced expert speaker Laura Weinberg, who has led the Great Neck Breast Cancer Coalition (GNBCC) for more than 17 years. The thorough presentation included an interactive exercise, where attendees examined the labels of common household, health and beauty products that were on display. Attendees walked away with a plethora of handouts and critical information about proactive health-saving measures that can be implemented in every area of their lives.

"I became interested in this topic many years ago, when a friend of mine in her 30s was diagnosed with breast cancer," said Weinberg. "I then realized that more than two dozen women in my neighborhood also had breast cancer. I became alarmed that so many women who I knew were touched by this disease, and it struck me that this might be a Great Neck phenomenon. I was inspired to learn more."

GNBCC is passionate about its mission to reduce the incidence of breast cancer. Since 1992, the organization has been dedicated to the battle against breast cancer through education and advocacy of breast cancer research. The group's website articulates its goal: "To further protect future generations, we also advocate breast cancer prevention research and we educate the public on ways to avoid toxic environmental exposures. Along with the battle against breast cancer through outreach, activism and research, we offer support for women who are newly diagnosed."

From the beginning of her involvement with GNBCC, Weinberg began to collect information and did extensive research, collaborating with breast cancer coalitions across the country. She learned the surprising statistic that 80 to 90 percent of breast cancer is not genetically inherited. In the overwhelming majority of cases, breast cancer is caused by environmental toxins. Estrogen plays a huge role. Two thirds of women are "Estrogen receptor (ER) positive."



Laura Weinberg of the Great Neck Breast Cancer Coalition answered many questions during her presentation. (Photo by Jacqueline Harounian)

Women are exposed to chemicals that mimic estrogen and these chemicals disrupt the natural steroids on a constant basis. It is suspected that the greatest risk is earlier in life, when chemicals disrupt normal mammary development. Early puberty is also a known risk factor.

Weinberg is extremely knowledgeable about toxicology, legislative efforts to combat chemical manufacturers and the risks to consumers. Over the years, she has advocated tirelessly for more transparency in labeling and advertising of everyday products.

“Only seven percent of chemicals on the market have been adequately tested for toxicity for chronic diseases,” noted Weinberg.

Since the manufacturers are so powerful and profit motivated, consumers are at a vast disadvantage. The inefficacy of our elected leaders in Congress exacerbates the health risk to everyday Americans. The answer to this problem is education and awareness. The more that consumers know about the existence of dangerous chemicals, the more they can choose to utilize safe alternatives. Avoiding or reducing exposure to carcinogenic toxins is possible with a little bit of research.

GNBCC offers the following 10 basic tips for individuals and families:

- 1.** Use safe alternatives to toxic pesticides inside and outside your home.
- 2.** Choose organic produce and milk.
- 3.** Avoid plastic for food storage.
- 4.** Buy nontoxic cosmetics and sunscreens.
- 5.** Avoid certain nonstick cooking pans.
- 6.** Use nontoxic cleaning products; learn to make your own from common household items, such as vinegar.
- 7.** Avoid chemical air fresheners and sprays.
- 8.** Avoid second-hand smoke and charbroiled foods.

9. Talk to your gardener about alternatives in lawn care.
10. Use nonchemical strategies to deal with rodents and bugs inside the home.

During the presentation, Weinberg, who was recognized with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Environmental Quality Award in 2010, the EPA's highest honor awarded to the public sector, answered the attendees' many questions and concerns completely and thoroughly.

GNBCC networks with regional and national breast cancer coalitions, environmental coalitions and government health agencies. The organization also attends regional and national conferences that address the latest breast health issues. Since the last presidential election, GNBCC has been in demand for speaking presentations and seminars. As the result of significant recent budget cuts to environmental and consumer protection agencies, awareness and education is more important than ever. Ongoing research is also vitally important.

Want to Know More?

For those interesting in learning more, Weinberg will be part of an expert panel at Adelphi University, entitled Environmental Impact on Breast Cancer, on April 16. The event is open to the public, although registration is required. The presentation will also be live-streamed on Adelphi's Facebook page and posted on YouTube, so it can be viewed at home. Attendees will learn about the latest research identifying environmental risk factors for breast cancer, with a specific focus on environmental chemicals. Studies from rodents and humans have shed light on the effects of chemicals widely used in consumer products. The panelists will discuss how to identify toxic environmental exposures, which have been linked with breast cancer, and how to avoid them by using safer alternatives in your home, work and school environment. The panelists will teach participants how to read labels on cosmetics and other consumer products, as well as how to address the challenges of a breast cancer diagnosis.

Opportunities for Students

GNBCC is an active and involved part of the Great Neck community. In addition to serving as a resource for up-to-date information and referrals, it provides opportunities for breast cancer prevention research for local high school students at both public and private schools. GNBCC offers several local programs and initiatives, including clean water campaigns and its popular Lend a Helping Hand and Student Scientist Summer Scholarship programs.

GNBCC is an all-volunteer organization staffed by Great Neck residents who donate their time. Find out more at www.greatneckbcc.org or contact the group on Facebook or at info@greatneckbcc.org. Donations are welcome at Great Neck Breast Cancer Coalition, P.O. Box 231190, Great Neck, NY 11023.

Kings Point resident Jacqueline Harounian is a regular contributor to the Great Neck Record. Her daughter Delilah had a great experience interning with the organization during her senior year of high school.

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