



DOING HER HOMEWORK:
“I spent days and days and days at the University of Miami library trying to get as informed as possible to understand what doctors were saying, ask the right questions and play a role in my treatment,” says Jane Torres, founder and president of the Florida Breast Cancer Research Coalition.

New Options

Increased funding is fueling new developments for diagnosis, treatment and prevention.

Breast cancer cases nationwide have tripled in the past 30 years, and the disease is now striking patients in their 20s and 30s instead of late 50s or older. That might be because women are more diligent about looking for it, says Jane Torres, founder and president of the Florida Breast Cancer Research Coalition.

One in every seven or eight women will be diagnosed with breast cancer at some point — including an estimated 211,240 this year nationwide and

13,430 in Florida, according to the American Cancer Society. It's the most common type of cancer among women. And it can strike men too. This year 1,690 U.S. men are expected to get breast cancer.

Although death rates have been decreasing, breast cancer this year will claim the lives of 40,410 women and 460 men. It's surpassed only by lung cancer as the most deadly cancer among women.

Increased research funding is producing new developments for diagnosis, treatment and even prevention, says Torres, herself a survivor of breast cancer in 1994. Federal funding for breast cancer research has climbed from less than \$90 million in 1991 to more than \$800 million.

In diagnosis, the mammogram is still the gold standard, but it's not 100% reliable. More people are turning to MRIs as an added precaution, Torres says.

In treatment, clinical trials all over the country and Florida are helping forge new alternatives. At the Mayo Clinic in Jacksonville, oncologist Edith Perez has been studying the effects of combining chemotherapy and a monoclonal antibody, the drug trastuzumab, known as Herceptin. The treatment has dramatically decreased incidences of recurrence and death.

In a process known as antiangiogenic therapy, researchers in Boston and Indiana have shown that a combination of bevacizumab, known as Avastin, and the chemotherapy drug paclitaxel, known as Taxol, slows the progress of cancer that has spread from the breast to other parts of the body.

In other clinical trials, researchers are looking at preventing recurrence with a low-fat diet and studying the use of aromatase inhibitor drugs that block tumor growth by lowering the amount of estrogen in the body.

Prevention is perhaps the biggest challenge in breast cancer research. “If we can't figure out what causes it, we can't figure out what prevents it,” Torres says. Advocates are pushing for studies of environmental factors such as food, plastics and pesticides, along with studies of psychological factors such as stress.