TuSalud

Life After Breast Cancer

Telenovela star Adamari López calls breast cancer the biggest challenge she has ever faced. Now she's sharing her story in the hope that other women, especially Latinas, will take charge of their health.

December 1, 2007 By Janirah Figueroa Fontáñez

It could happen to me, or you, or our sisters or mothers. In 2005 it happened to Adamari López. The young, lovely, talented TV star, now 36, found an abnormal mass in one of her breasts during a self-examination. Her doctor confirmed it was breast cancer, one of the leading causes of death for Hispanic women in the United States as well as in Latin America. Fortunately, López's cancer was discovered in its early stages, and surgery and treatment have been successful. For the moment cancer-free (yet full of life), the *puertorriqueña* spoke with *Tu Salud* about how her experience with breast cancer has changed her.

The Discovery

Just before her diagnosis, López thought she was immune to breast cancer. "I felt super healthy, and in my family no one had cancer," she says. "I always did periodic checkups and never, until the moment I found the mass, thought that I could develop this disease."

The thinking that breast cancer doesn't affect them is one reason some women, Latinas in particular, tend to be diagnosed later, when chances for recovery are more limited. López urges all women to perform self-exams. "Lose your fear of touching your breasts, and of your sexuality," she says. "I always tell teenage girls to examine their breasts no matter their cup size. [Women should do this so they notice from month to month if there are any changes.]"

The Metamorphosis

As soon as she was diagnosed, López held a press conference in San Juan, Puerto Rico to announce her condition, then withdrew from the entertainment industry to devote herself to her recovery. The biggest physical changes happened during therapy. "When you discover you have this disease, the majority of the time, unless you have a secretion or deep pain in your breasts, you don't feel anything," she says. "Then after the treatments and operations, you begin to feel a lot of pain in your bones and joints, and you are always nauseous. I got fatter, although I kept active and always walked. Later, exactly on the 14th day of chemotherapy, I began to lose my hair."

In the mirror, she felt Adamari López the star—renowned for her acting, sculpted body and romance with singer (now her husband) Luis Fonsi—was left behind. For the moment, TV camera

lights and paparazzi flashbulbs were gone, but not her hopes for survival. She decided not to obsess about how her face or body appeared post-treatment. “What I wanted was to continue to have courage,” she says, “so I could face the medical situations that were presenting themselves and not worry about physical things. Today medicine is very advanced: Hair grows back and many women get breast implants, so those things were not so important to me.”

López credits her recovery to her own love for life, her faith in God and the support of her loved ones. “That communication, affection and helping hand from your family are what get you through it,” she says. “If you’re feeling self-pity and just lying in bed all day, the experience will not be easy. But it’s different if you have the desire to live, and you think that all the difficulty and negativity you are experiencing will soon be over.”

López says surviving breast cancer has made her a more confident woman who knows what it means to face challenges and overcome them. Now, she says, she is “stronger, happier, more full of life, a more complete woman.”

A New Beginning

This year, López returned to TV as Ingrid Linares, the “bad girl” of Televisa’s new soap opera *Bajo las Riendas del Amor*. Despite long hours of taping, press and appearances, López says her desire to be healthy outstrips the demands of fame. With the same discipline that drives her gym workouts, she takes a daily pill, tamoxifen, to eliminate the production of estrogen and progesterone in her body. As part of her postoperative therapy, López must stay on this regimen for five years to reduce the risk of the cancer returning.

López confesses it isn’t easy to deal with the side effects of chemotherapy, including fatigue, hair loss and early onset menopause. She’s also had to postpone one of her biggest dreams: motherhood. “I have to take the medication as required and continue my exams,” she says. “If all goes well, we can make new decisions [when the time comes].”

In 2006 López became a spokesperson for the Susan G. Komen for the Cure foundation. With the goal of creating awareness about breast cancer in the Hispanic community, she has spoken to women in the U.S. and Latin America about the importance of early detection and prevention. She says she’s not afraid to tell the truth about a disease that kills thousands of women each year. “Prevention is what saves our lives,” she says. “The quicker we can find a way to get or keep cancer out of our bodies, the greater our possibilities for living.”

Breast Exam Smarts

- Breast cancer is the most common cancer and a major cause of death among Latinas. To reduce your odds:
- In your 20s, begin performing monthly breast self-examinations (find self-exam tips in Spanish

and English at https://www.komen.org/breast-cancer/screening/breast-self-exam/ or call 800.462.9273). The best time for self-exams is a week after your menstrual period, when your breasts aren't as sensitive or swollen.

- In your 20s and 30s, have a health professional perform a clinical breast exam every three years. If your risk is higher than average (such as if an immediate family member developed cancer before menopause), talk to your doctor about getting a mammogram (x-ray of your breasts). For certain women at high risk, doctors may recommend an MRI (magnetic resonance imaging, which allows the detection of smaller tumors).
- After 40, have your doctor perform an annual mammogram. If your risk is high, talk to your doctor about getting MRIs.

For more breast cancer info in Spanish and English, call the Susan G. Komen for the Cure Helpline at 800.462.9273.

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