

**MORE THAN**

*just* WORDS



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# A Black Woman's Guide to "The Breast Cancer Talk" With Doctors

Talking with your doctor about a breast cancer concern can be very scary, especially for Black women who are almost 40% more likely to die from breast cancer than white women.<sup>1</sup>

Here is a guide with advice from Dr. Monique Gary, DO, MSc, FACS, Medical Director of the Grand View Health Cancer Program and *More Than Just Words* Advisor, to help you with what to expect – and what not to accept – during your visit at the doctor's office.

~2%

**Black providers comprise only ~2% of practicing oncologists.<sup>2</sup> This may contribute to communication barriers and access to quality, consistent, culturally competent care.**

## Establishing Trust

Make an assertive effort to create a trusting relationship with your doctor. Help them to acknowledge you as an important partner in your care. Having an active role will be impactful for you and your entire care team:

- ✓ **Ask questions**
- ✓ **Be an active listener: mirror or repeat what is being said for clarity**
- ✓ **Ask your doctor for resources to review after your appointment**
- ✓ **Invite your doctor to view things from your perspective**

1. Richardson LC, Henley SJ, Miller JW, Massetti G, Thomas CC. Patterns and Trends in Age-Specific Black-White Differences in Breast Cancer Incidence and Mortality – United States, 1999–2014. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 2016;65:1093–1098. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6540a1>

2. Facts & FIGURES: Diversity in oncology. (2021, February 05). Retrieved April 20, 2021, from <https://www.asco.org/practice-policy/cancer-care-initiatives/diversity-oncology-initiative/facts-figures-diversity>

## 5 Musts at Your Screening Appointment

1

**Family History Discussion**

2

**A Thorough Breast Exam**

3

**Ordering of Imaging (scans/tests)**

4

**Time for Q and A**

5

**A Follow-up Plan**

There may be conversations that seem invasive or uncomfortable. Before you take offense, here are some topics your doctors should discuss with you that may be important for your diagnosis and care:

### Breasts:

Doctors should have a clinical, appropriate conversation with you about breast density. The density of your breasts can determine the type of imaging you may need and be offered. If your breasts are very dense, you may be prescribed a 3D mammogram, whole breast ultrasound, or possibly Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI).<sup>3,4</sup>

### Weight:

It is standard for offices to record your weight and Body Mass Index (BMI) as per medical guidelines. Terms such as "obese" or "overweight" may be used based on BMI definitions, and a patient may be referred to as these terms as it correlates with medical guidelines. Your doctor should focus on your overall wellness including, but not limited to, weight.

### Family History:

Doctors should ask you about your maternal and paternal family medical histories. If you don't have access to information from both sides of your family, simply notify your doctor of this and be prepared to give as much information as you have available.

## Was That a Biased or Racist Response?

Unfortunately, there are times when health care professionals may have racial biases toward patients. Here are some examples of red flags that may be a sign that you should seek a second opinion.

- ✓ Racially insensitive or derogatory comments
- ✓ Assumptions based on racial stereotypes
- ✓ Expectations that you should endure discomfort or pain

## Before You Walk Away...

Here are some ways to constructively further the conversation if you suspect bias:

- ✓ "Is this included in the medical guidelines? Where?"
- ✓ "What makes you say that?"
- ✓ "I didn't expect to hear that/I didn't expect you to say..."

**Trust your gut if you feel uncomfortable. It is your right to seek a second opinion or find a different doctor.**

3. Bakker MF, de Lange SV, Pijnappel RM, et al. Supplemental MRI Screening for Women with Extremely Dense Breast Tissue. *N Engl J Med*. 2019;381(22):2091-2102. doi:10.1056/NEJMoa1903986

4. American Cancer Society. Breast Density and Your Mammogram Report. (2019, April). Retrieved June 17, 2021, from <https://www.cancer.org/content/dam/cancer-org/cancer-control/en/booklets-flyers/breast-density-and-your-mammogram-report-handout.pdf>

## Need More Time?

At the end of your appointment, there should always be time for feedback, questions, and answers. You should not feel rushed. But oftentimes, doctors have several patients booked in a day. They are also trying to complete notes about your case during the office visit. However, if you feel that your needs are not being addressed, here are some ways to ask for more time or clarity.

- ✓ "Can you pause from the notes for a minute?" Then, ask your follow-up questions
- ✓ "Can you explain to me what should I expect between now and our next visit?"
- ✓ "What I'm hearing you say is..." Then repeat what you are hearing in your own words
- ✓ "I need a little more time, can we schedule a follow-up?"

### Questions to ask if you feel like your doctor is dismissing your concerns

- ✓ "Should we look at this further with imaging (scans, tests)?"
- ✓ "How can we be sure (that it is/is not a concern)?"
- ✓ "When can we have a follow-up exam or appointment?"

## About More Than Just Words

*More Than Just Words* ([www.MoreThanJustWords.US](http://www.MoreThanJustWords.US)) is a multiyear commitment to promote health equity in breast cancer care, where there is a significant unmet need. The initiative will support programs that raise awareness of existing disparities across the continuum of breast cancer care, stress the urgency that women get the screening or care they need as soon as possible, and build solutions to promote health equity in breast cancer.