

Anne Johnson: Welcome to Environmental Health Chat, a podcast about how the environment affects our health, from the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences. I'm your host Anne Johnson. Today we're continuing our series on breast cancer and the environment. In part one, we looked at how factors like diet or chemical exposures can affect a person's risk of getting breast cancer. In this second and final episode, we're looking at how organizations can help translate breast cancer research into the decisions we make in our everyday lives.

Our guest is Jeanne Rizzo, President and CEO of the Breast Cancer Fund. Jeanne is an active member of the NIEHS partners group, and she was a member of the Interagency Breast Cancer and Environmental Research Coordinating Committee and the lead of the Translation, Dissemination and Communication group. Her organization uses science to advance breast cancer prevention.

Rizzo: We deal with what personal actions individuals can take to reduce their exposure to known or suspected carcinogens or endocrine disrupting chemicals. We also talk about corporate accountability and responsibility, the businesses that manufacture and sell those products, and how can we engage you, the public, in helping us drive industry to make better decisions. The third place is in public policy engagement. We engage with community members to help them be better advocates for the kind of policies that will be more protective.

Johnson: She says it's important for advocates to engage with the public, corporations and policymakers. But there's another, critical group involved in the fight to prevent breast cancer—scientists. In order to know which factors in our environment are potentially harmful, and what people can do to protect themselves, we need good science that examines how environmental factors affect us. An approach called participatory research links scientists with community members to help researchers focus their efforts on those environmental factors that are of greatest concern.

Rizzo: Participatory research on breast cancer and the environment, it's vital. It's not a simple matter of we're going to take this chemical and see if it causes this disease in this person. You have to understand what the community's concerns are, what the unique exposures are. You get that best by engaging the community early in the process. Then relationships are formed.

Johnson: And those relationships go both ways. Scientists learn which environmental factors people are concerned about, and when the research findings are available, community members are in a better position to understand what it means for them. But interpreting scientific findings can be tricky, so Jeanne says researchers and advocates need to work together to help people understand their risk.

Rizzo: I think you have to start with your understanding and definition of risk. And that is very different depending on whether or not you talk to an epidemiologist or whether or not you talk to a community member. Community members want to understand things in the real life ways in which they live. The yellow traffic light comes up and you've got a carpool full of kids, do you go through it? So they want our help in weighing evidence and dealing with uncertainty.

Johnson: So how do you connect all the dots between research and reality? Jeanne says it starts with listening.

Rizzo: The Breast Cancer Fund has a program called "Strong Voices" and those are community activists and advocates who we have trained on our mission, on our science, on what we have come to know and

understand about breast cancer and the environment, who are out there and asked to listen and give us feedback about what they hear in their communities. It could be the neonatal nurse working in a hospital understanding some of the challenges that the medical profession deals with in talking to new moms. It could be a mom's activist group like Moms Rising, what are the questions coming through on their website from concerned mothers about toxics. What are the recurring themes and concerns? So in order for us to be effective, we need to listen to groups across a wide spectrum.

Johnson: And when you move from listening to talking, Jeanne says it's important to tailor information about breast cancer and the environment depending on whether you're talking to scientists, or, well, the rest of us. Or to specific groups, like mothers or a certain ethnic community.

Rizzo: The first level of engagement is to get people where they are. So our website and our collateral material is stratified. We have little postcards called prevention tips. They're really simple. Don't microwave in plastic. Things to avoid. Chemicals to look for. There's the Healthy Homes Tour on our website. You go to the website and you can click on the front yard and you'll see a pop-up about pesticides. And you can go deeper to understand the wonky science about pesticides, or the policies that are necessary, but you can also see some of the personal tips about what to use to clean your house with, or on the personal care product level. We create these atmospheres that you might really be living in.

Johnson: Jeanne says all these outreach efforts by her organization and others are really paying off. Recently, some of their strong voices advocates reported that community members were starting to ask a new question—now that baby bottles no longer contain BPA, what are the new chemicals manufacturers are using in its place? And are they safe?

Rizzo: What we've done is we've educated the public to the extent that they're asking what are they using in the alternative? Those are more sophisticated questions than we were asking five years ago. And I think if we can contribute to an iterative progression of sophistication how we think about it then we might get some answers.

Johnson: And when the science provides those answers, Jeanne Rizzo and other breast cancer advocates will be ready to spread the word. Thanks to Jeanne Rizzo for joining us today. Visit our podcast page for more resources on how to reduce your risk.

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