

When it comes to breast cancer, ignorance is not bliss

 By [Katja Hamilton](#)

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It's a daunting fact that in their lifetime, one in 26 South African women will be diagnosed with breast cancer, and one in eight women run the risk of developing some form of cancer. Research shows that cancer is predicted to rise in prevalence by 78% by 2030 in South Africa, and - contrary to prior narratives - the disease is targeting young women.



Source: Supplied. Debbie Gebhardt, chief executive officer at CheckKnowPrevent.

[Velisa Sishuba](#), the ambassador of CheckKnowPrevent, was 17 when she was diagnosed with breast cancer, and she sadly lost her fight to the disease at the age of 22.

What this boils down to, says Debbie Gebhardt, chief executive officer of the non-profit organisation, is that having an annual mammogram or once-a-year reminder in Breast Cancer Awareness month to check your breasts is simply not

enough.

"There are so many implications: there's your own health, there's the impact on your family; and there's the impact of the treatment you'll have to go through. The treatment you receive could be so much less invasive if the cancer were detected early."

There is an up side, Gebhardt adds.

"When diagnosed at Stage 1, the five-year survival rate is as high as 98% - at Stage 0 this rises to almost 100%. What this tells us in no uncertain terms is that early detection is key to survival," Gebhardt says.

"The problem is that so many women don't self-check, not only because they put it at the back of their minds but because people don't know how. We did research among 45 women, and more than 50% of them said they had no idea how to self-check."

This is where the CheckKnowPrevent sports bra comes in.

The proudly South African bra was launched this week at [ShopStar](#), a place for makers and creators to start, manage and grow successful online stores as an adjunct to [checkknowprevent.shop](#).

A world-first, this revolutionary bra promotes early detection of breast cancer by using its hidden inner lining to communicate how to correctly perform a self-breast examination. Further to this, the bra highlights what warning signs to look out for that could necessitate further examination by a professional.

Says Gebhardt: "Jenny De Oliveira, operations director and founder of CheckKnowPrevent, came up with the idea to use a garment that we wear everyday to convey not only instructions on how to do the breast examination, but as a reminder so every time you take it off, it's at the back of your mind.

"Maybe if you're in the shower, even if you're not doing a check, even if you're just washing yourself and you feel a little lump or you see an irregularity, the bra's messaging will come to mind and you'll think to yourself to go see your doctor.



Source: Supplied.

"The key thing here is that so many women think of breast cancer as a lump but there are so many different ways that breast cancer can manifest itself. It can look like orange-peel effect on the skin of your breast; it can be a red warm area; it can be a section of your breast that is hardened.

"There are so many different indicators; so this bra reminds us to be vigilant and indicates all those signs to look out for."

The CheckKnowPrevent garment can be worn as a supportive work-out sports bra, or a comfortable, fashionable racer-back cropped tank top.

"It sports lovely soft fabric - 85% polyester 15% spandex - has good stretch but still offers good support," Gebhardt says.

It can be modified to suit women post mastectomy: "It's a padded bra where the pads can be removed, but what we're doing now is we're extending the little opening where you insert the pad so women can accommodate a prosthesis as well."

"So even if you've had a mastectomy you'll still be able to wear the sports bra out.

Committed to recycling all its waste fabric, CheckKnowPrevent uses its fabric offcuts to make these prostheses.

The feel-good factor of the organisation doesn't end here.



Source: Supplied.

"We used to have lots of bra-manufacturing plants in South Africa, but they all gradually closed down, and bra production became China's domain," Gebhardt says.

"We have very few bra-manufacturing facilities in South Africa but we managed to track down a bra and lingerie specialist who has been instrumental in the design of our bras. We approached the women at a small CFT business and we offered to educate them on how to manufacture our bras.

"We were able to take this tiny little factory, which was previously doing very limited runs of swimwear, and gear it to producing our bras."

Upskilling women, empowering them and providing them with employment is a major driver of the ethos at CheckKnowPrevent, and it's a principle that extends too to young women at school.

"Our team would like to achieve their dream of going into schools in disadvantaged areas and donating a bra to every Grade 11 and Grade 12 female student.

"We need to get traction on it, to get a company to take it on as their CSI project," Gebhardt says. "Our biggest challenge is getting funding to get the bras made. To date, Jenny De Oliveira, myself and Lorraine Verhagen have largely funded everything ourselves."

The organisation will also be hosting free education drives at schools and community centres in disadvantaged areas to educate women on self-checking, and to dispel myths and ensure they are empowered with the facts about breast cancer.

"There are so many ways in which this bra is giving back."

Find out more about CheckKnowPrevent and how it was founded [here](#).

ABOUT KATJA HAMILTON

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