

Breast Cancer Health Message

What Is Breast Cancer?

Breast cancer is a malignant tumor that starts in the cells of the breast. In its early stages, breast cancer usually has no symptoms. As the tumor develops, the most common symptoms are a change in the look or feel of the breast, a change in the look or feel of the nipple, or nipple discharge. Breast cancer occurs mainly in women, but men can also get it. However, this message will focus only on women. Early detection and improved treatments have steadily decreased death rates.

How Common Is Breast Cancer?

- ▶ It is the second most common cancer in women in the United States, after skin cancer.
- ▶ It is the second leading cause of cancer-related death in women in the United States.
- ▶ One out of eight women will be diagnosed with breast cancer at some point in her life.

The cause of most breast cancers is unknown. However, the most likely cause is related to changes in the genetic material (DNA) in the cells. DNA is the substance in the cells that makes up the genes, which provide instructions for how a cell works. DNA changes are often related to lifestyle, but some can be due to age and other factors.

Lowering the Risk of Breast Cancer

How all women can lower their risk:

- ▶ Get to and stay at a healthy weight.
- ▶ Be physically active.
- ▶ Limit alcohol use.
- ▶ Limit tobacco use.
- ▶ Breast-feed your babies.
- ▶ Avoid hormone therapy to deal with the symptoms of menopause.

American Cancer Society (ACS) Recommendations for Early Detection

- ▶ Women age 40 and older should have a screening mammogram every year and should continue to do so for as long as they are in good health.
- ▶ Women in their 20s and 30s should have a clinical breast exam (CBE) as part of a wellness visit or check-up by a health professional, preferably every 3 years. After age 40, women should have a CBE by a health professional annually.
- ▶ Breast self-exam (BSE) is an option for women starting in their 20s. There are limitations and benefits. Any breast changes should be reported immediately to a health professional.

Some women should be screened with an MRI in addition to mammograms because of family history or genetic tendency. It is important to talk with your doctor about your history and the need for additional tests at an earlier age.

Breast Cancer Risk Factors

Risk factors are anything that can increase or decrease a person's chance of getting a disease. There are many known risks factors for breast cancer. Some can be changed and some cannot.

Risk Factors	Comments
Gender	Being a woman is the main risk factor for developing breast cancer.
Aging	Breast cancer risk increases as a woman gets older.
Genetic risk factors	About 5–10 percent of breast cancer cases are thought to be hereditary, caused by gene changes inherited from a parent.
Family history of breast cancer	Breast cancer risk is higher among women whose close blood relatives have this disease.
Personal medical history	A woman with cancer in one breast is three to four times more likely to develop a new cancer in the other breast or in another part of the same breast.
Personal medical history	Certain noncancer breast problems can be risk factors.
Personal medical history	Women who had radiation to the chest for another cancer as a child or young adult are at a much higher risk.
Postmenopausal hormone therapy	Women who use or recently used combined postmenopausal hormone therapy for many years have an increased risk.
DES exposure	Women who were given DES from the 1940s to the 1960s because it was thought to lower their chances of having a miscarriage.
Recent oral contraceptive use	Women who take oral contraceptives have a slightly higher risk, but the risk goes down when discontinued.
Race	Breast cancer risk is higher among white women than African American women; however, African American women are more likely to die of this cancer.
Dense breast tissue	Women with denser breast tissue (as seen on a mammogram) have more glandular tissue and less fatty tissue and have a higher risk of breast cancer.
Not having children or having them later in life	Having children after age 30 puts a woman at slightly higher risk.
More menstrual cycles	Women who started menstruation early or went through menopause late have a slightly higher risk.
Not breastfeeding	Some studies suggest that breastfeeding may lower breast cancer risk.
Physical activity	Being more active decreases risk.
Overweight	Obesity raises risk of having breast cancer, especially after menopause.
Alcohol use	Alcohol use is clearly linked to increased risk, and the risk goes up with the amount of alcohol you drink.

In summary, change the risk factors you can control. Maintain a healthy weight throughout life, be physically active, limit sedentary behavior (excessive sitting, lying down, watching television), and limit alcohol. Women should have no more than one alcoholic drink a day. For more information, visit the ACS website at www.cancer.org, or call 1-800-227-2345.

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