

What you need to know

What can I do to lower my risk of breast cancer?

The causes of breast cancer are not fully known. It is clear that age, gender and lifetime exposure to estrogen play a role. Also, other factors may increase your risk. No one knows exactly why someone gets breast cancer. There are steps you can take that may reduce your risk. These include maintaining a healthy weight, adding exercise into your routine, limiting alcohol intake and menopausal hormone use, and breastfeeding (if you can).

For women at higher risk, preventive surgery or taking tamoxifen or raloxifene may greatly reduce the risk of breast cancer.

Who gets breast cancer?

Anyone can get breast cancer. For example, did you know...

- the older a woman, the more likely she is to get breast cancer?
- white women are more likely to get breast cancer than women of any other racial or ethnic group?
- African American women are more likely to die from breast cancer than white women?
- men can get breast cancer? About one percent of breast cancers in the U.S. occur in men.

Am I at risk for breast cancer?

All women are at risk. The most common risk factors for breast cancer are being female and getting older. Most women who get breast cancer have no other known risk factors.



I have a family history of breast cancer. Does that mean I'll develop breast cancer, too?

Some inherited gene mutations can increase risk. However, most breast cancers are not related to genes or family history. So, just because other family members had breast cancer doesn't mean it was due to an inherited gene mutation. In the U.S., only about 5 to 10 percent of all breast cancers occur because of inherited gene mutations.

If you are concerned about your family history of breast cancer, talk with your health care provider or a genetic counselor.

If I am diagnosed with breast cancer, what are my chances of surviving?

In general, the chances of survival are good. Most people will live a full life and never have a recurrence. Your chances of survival are better if the cancer is found early, before it spreads to other parts of your body. In fact, when breast cancer is found early and confined to the breast, the 5-year relative survival rate is 99 percent.

Your best defense

The best way to find breast cancer early is to get screened. Talk with your health care provider about which screening tests are right for you.

A **mammogram** is an X-ray image of the breast. It is the best screening tool used today to find breast cancer early. A mammogram can find cancer before a lump can be felt. Women age 40 and older should have a mammogram every year. If you are younger than 40 with a family history of breast cancer or other concerns, talk with your health care provider about what screening tests are right for you.

A **clinical breast exam** is done by a health care provider who checks your breasts and underarm areas for any lumps or changes. Women should have this test at least every 3 years between the ages of 20 and 39 and every year starting at age 40. Many women have a clinical breast exam when they get their Pap test.

Know what is normal for you

The signs of breast cancer are not the same for all women. It is important to know how your breasts normally look and feel. If you notice any change, see your health care provider.

Are you at risk?

Most women have more than one known risk factor for breast cancer, yet will never get the disease. Some risk factors you have no control over, such as getting older, while others can be changed. What is the most important risk factor? Simply being a woman. But remember, there is no *one* cause of breast cancer. If you are concerned about your risk, talk with your health care provider.

Some risk factors include:

- being a woman
- getting older
- an inherited mutation in the BRCA1 or BRCA2 breast cancer genes
- hyperplasia or lobular carcinoma in situ (LCIS)
- a personal history of breast cancer (including ductal carcinoma in situ (DCIS))
- a family history of breast or ovarian cancer
- high breast density on a mammogram
- older age at menopause (age 55 or older)
- never having children or having a first child after age 35
- exposure to large amounts of radiation at a young age
- lack of exercise
- being overweight or weight gain as an adult (postmenopausal breast cancer)
- current or recent use (for more than 5 years) of menopausal hormone therapy (postmenopausal hormone use) containing estrogen plus progestin
- alcohol use
- younger age at first period (before age 12)
- current or recent use of birth control pills
- not breastfeeding
- Ashkenazi Jewish heritage

For more information about these and other risk factors, visit www.komen.org/risk.

Related fact sheets in this series:

- Breast Cancer in Men
- Breast Cancer Risk Factors
- Breast Density
- Healthy Living
- Racial & Ethnic Differences

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