

What you need to know

Can I prevent breast cancer?

The causes of breast cancer are not fully understood. Although it is clear that age, gender and lifetime exposure to estrogen and other factors play an important role. Because no one knows exactly what causes breast cancer, there are no sure ways to prevent it. However, there are steps that you can take that may reduce your risk. These include maintaining a healthy weight, adding exercise into your routine, limiting alcohol intake and postmenopausal hormones, and breastfeeding if you can. For women at higher risk, tamoxifen or raloxifene may be taken to 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?
- young women can and do get breast cancer, even in their 20s?
- 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? Out of every one hundred cases of breast cancer, one will occur in a man.

Am I at risk for breast cancer?

All women are at risk for breast cancer. Known risk factors like having a family history of breast cancer, starting menopause after age 55 or never having children account for only a small number of new breast cancer cases every year.

That means that most women who get breast cancer have no known risk factors except being a woman and getting older.



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

Just because other family members have had breast cancer doesn't mean that their disease was inherited. In the U.S., only about 5 to 10 percent of all breast cancers occur because of inherited mutations.¹

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

In general, pretty good. The 5-year survival rate for all women diagnosed with breast cancer is 90 percent.¹ This means that 90 out of every 100 women with breast cancer will survive for at least five years. Most will live a full life and never have a recurrence. Your chances of survival are better if the cancer is detected 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 survival rate is 98 percent.¹ That is why it is so important to take steps to detect breast cancer in its earliest stages.

¹ American Cancer Society, Cancer Facts & Figures 2011.

Your best defense

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

A **mammogram** is an X-ray of the breast. It is the best screening tool used today to find breast cancer early. A mammogram can find cancer in its earliest stages, even before a lump can be felt. All women age 40 and older should have a mammogram every year. If you are younger than age 40 with either a family history of breast cancer or other concerns, talk with your health care provider about when to start getting mammograms or other screening tests, like MRI, and how often to have them.

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

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 are things that you do not have any control over, 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.

Risk factors:

- being a woman
- getting older
- having an inherited mutation in the BRCA1 or BRCA2 breast cancer gene
- lobular carcinoma in situ (LCIS)
- a personal history of breast or ovarian cancer
- a family history of breast, ovarian or prostate cancer
- having high breast density on a mammogram
- having a previous biopsy showing atypical hyperplasia
- starting menopause after age 55
- never having children
- having your first child after age 35
- radiation exposure, frequent X-rays in youth
- high bone density
- being overweight after menopause or gaining weight as an adult
- postmenopausal hormone use (current or recent use) of estrogen or estrogen plus progestin

Related fact sheets in this series:

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