



Breast cancer

There are currently more than 2.5 million breast cancer survivors in the United States. Almost everyone knows at least one woman who has had the disease. What causes breast cancer? Is there anything a woman can do to lower her chances of getting breast cancer?

There are certain risk factors every woman should be aware of:

- 1. Obesity.** Not only is obesity dangerous for your heart, it is also a risk factor for breast cancer. One health study involving postmenopausal women determined that the heaviest women are 35 percent more likely to develop aggressive breast cancer. Body mass index (BMI) is also a factor. In the same study, women with the highest BMIs were 35 to 39 percent more likely to develop certain types of breast cancer.
- 2. Alcohol.** Too much alcohol increases a woman's risk of getting breast cancer. The more alcohol a woman drinks, the higher her risk of developing breast cancer.
- 3. Family history.** Women who inherit certain genes will have a higher risk of breast cancer. The cancer could develop at a young age.
- 4. Too much estrogen.** Estrogen is a hormone that helps the body grow and maintain female characteristics. Prolonged exposure to estrogen in the breast tissue may increase the risk of breast cancer. Risk could be increased in these ways:
 - Beginning menstruation at age 11 or earlier.
 - Late menopause.
 - Late pregnancy, after age 35, or never having been pregnant.
- 5. Hormone replacement therapy (HRT).** Many women receive HRT to reduce the effects of menopause or to replace estrogen after having their ovaries removed.
- 6. Exposure to radiation.** If a woman has had radiation treatment in her chest area, her chances of getting breast cancer increase starting 10 years *after* she received treatment. The increased risk lasts a lifetime. The risk is highest if a woman received the radiation during puberty.

What can you do?

There are choices a woman can make and preventive measures she can take:

- 1. Exercise.** All it takes is four hours of moderate exercise a week to decrease your hormone levels and cut your risk of breast cancer. If four hours a week seems like a lot, think about breaking it down into smaller increments of time. Go for a walk at lunch, take the stairs, take an exercise class with a friend, enjoy the outdoors and go for a bike ride. Mix it up and make it fun.
- 2. Eat a healthy diet.** If two-thirds of what you eat comes from plants, and the rest is lean meat, fish or low-fat dairy food, you'll be going a long way toward preventing cancer. Limit processed meat (bacon, sausage, lunch meats, and hot dogs) and red meat. Eat at least 2½ cups of vegetables and fruits each day. Choose whole grains (such as barley and oats) instead of breads, cereals, and pasta made from refined grains, and choose brown rice instead of white rice. Limit your intake of refined carbohydrate foods, including pastries, candy, sugar-sweetened breakfast cereals, and other high-sugar foods. *Be sure to read the nutrition label!*
- 3. Limit alcohol.** Women should limit their intake to one drink per day.
- 4. Find out your family history.** Tell your doctor. This information can help the doctor formulate a preventive plan for you.

Screening

Regular screening is so important for detecting breast cancer in the early stages. There are three kinds of screenings:

- Monthly self-exam: if you feel a lump or anything unusual, call your doctor.
- Clinical exam by a health professional
- Mammogram: if you're under age 40, ask your doctor when you should start getting mammograms. If you're at least 40 years old, you should get one every one to two years.



Premera/LifeWise Nurse Hotline: 800-841-8343