

Breast cancer

Breast cancer is one of the most common types of cancer for women in the United States. Though rare, it can also occur in men. Everyone should be aware of the risk factors. It's important to learn how to protect your health.

Who gets breast cancer?

You're at a higher risk if you:

- Are age 50 or older (nearly 80% of all breast cancer cases occur after age 50)
- Have a mother, sister or daughter who has had breast cancer
- Have changes in particular genes on your chromosomes that are associated with a higher incidence of breast cancer
- Started your period before age 12
- Started menopause after age 55
- Had your first child after age 30
- Have had no children
- Have used certain hormones, like DES, that may be associated with an increased risk of breast cancer
- Have had previous breast biopsies with certain abnormalities
- Have extremely dense breast tissue on mammograms
- Have had breast cancer or gynecologic cancer (especially ovarian or uterine cancer)
- Are obese or physically inactive
- Drink alcohol

The presence of one or more risk factors doesn't mean you'll develop cancer. In fact, other than age, most women with breast cancer have no identifiable risk factors.

What are the signs?

A woman with breast cancer may not see any signs at first. That's why it's important to see your doctor on a regular basis. Once signs begin to show, a woman may notice:

- A lump or thickening in or near the breast, or in the underarm area
- A change in the size or shape of the breast or nipple
- Discharge from the nipple or nipple itching or tenderness
- A change in the color or feel of the skin on or around any part of the breast. The skin may be dimpled, puckered or scaly

These are signs of breast cancer. But they also may be signs of less serious health conditions. Don't panic. Be sure to talk with your doctor as soon as you see any symptoms.

How can I check for breast cancer?

When cancer is found and treated early, you'll have a better chance of healing.

- **Get regular checkups.** Talk with your doctor about clinical breast exams, mammograms, and other studies as indicated. Ask at what age and how often you need to be checked. Some women at higher risk of breast cancer may need earlier screening and other tests in addition to mammograms.
- **Ask about breast self-awareness versus breast self-exams.** The usefulness of breast self-exams is still in question and some experts are now recommending breast self-awareness, or knowing how your breasts normally look and feel. It is important that you know how your breasts normally look and feel. Knowing how your breasts are normally may help you notice changes in your body. Talk with your doctor if you find any changes. Your doctor can help you learn more and help you decide which method is best for you.
- **Live a healthy life.** Limit alcohol. Eat low-fat foods, and lots of fruits and vegetables. Ask your doctor what weight is right for you. Exercise regularly.

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