

What you need to know

How can I prevent breast cancer?

The causes of breast cancer are not fully understood, although it is clear that a woman's lifetime exposure to estrogen and her age at the time of her first childbirth play an important role. Because no one knows exactly what causes breast cancer, there are no sure ways to prevent it. There are steps that every woman can take that may make developing breast cancer less likely. These include eating healthy, exercising regularly and limiting the amount of alcohol you drink. Leading a healthy lifestyle will not eliminate your chance of getting breast cancer, but it may help reduce your risk. For women at higher risk, the antiestrogen drug tamoxifen can also help to reduce the risk of developing breast cancer.

Who gets breast cancer?

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

- the older a woman is, the more likely she is to get breast cancer?
- white women are more likely to get breast cancer than any other racial or ethnic group? They also have a better chance of survival, primarily because their cancer is usually detected earlier.
- African American women are more likely to die from breast cancer than white women
- in 2003, it is estimated that men will account for 1,300 cases of breast cancer.¹

How do I know if I am 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 the majority of 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?

Not necessarily. Just because other family members have had breast cancer doesn't mean that their disease was inherited. Only about 5 percent of all breast cancers happen because of inherited mutations.²

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 86 percent.³ This means that 86 out of every 100 women whose breast cancer is detected early will survive without a recurrence for at least five years. Your chances of surviving are better if the cancer is detected early, before it spreads to other parts of your body. In fact, when breast cancer is confined to the breast, the 5-year survival rate is over 95 percent.² That is why it is so important to take steps to detect breast cancer in its earliest stages.

^{1,2} American Cancer Society, Cancer Facts and Figures 2003.

³ American Cancer Society, Breast Cancer Facts and Figures 2001-2002.



Your best defense

The best way to detect breast cancer in its earliest stages is to routinely check your breasts for signs and symptoms of the disease. There are three basic methods:

Breast self-exam (BSE) involves two main steps, looking at and feeling your breasts for any change from normal. If you notice any change in the normal look or feel of your breasts, see your health care provider. All women should perform monthly BSE by age 20. BSE should be done once a month, a few days after the last day of your period. If you no longer get your period, do BSE on the same day each month. At your next appointment, ask your health care provider to show you the right techniques for BSE. (For step-by-step BSE instructions, go to www.komen.org/bse or call 1.800 I'M AWARE® (1.800.462.9273) to request a free BSE card.)

Clinical breast exam is performed by a health care provider who carefully checks your breasts and underarm areas for any lumps or changes that may be present. Many women have a clinical breast exam performed 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 after 40.

Mammograms are X-ray pictures of the breast. They can detect breast cancer in its earliest stages, even before a lump can be felt. All women 40 and older should have a mammogram every year. If you are younger than 40 with either a family history of breast cancer or other concerns about personal risk, talk with your health care provider about risk assessment, when to start getting mammograms and how often to have them.

Are you at risk?

Most women have more than one known risk factor for developing 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 by making changes in your lifestyle (see list below).

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 breast cancer risk, discuss your breast health needs with your doctor.

Known and probable risk factors:

- being a woman
- getting older
- having a personal history of breast or ovarian cancer
- having a family history of breast cancer
- having a previous biopsy showing atypical hyperplasia or carcinoma in situ
- having your first period before age 12
- starting menopause after age 55
- never having children
- having your first child after age 30
- having a mutation in the BRCA1 or BRCA2 breast cancer genes
- drinking more than 1 alcoholic drink per day
- being overweight after menopause or gaining weight as an adult
- currently or recently using combined estrogen and progesterone hormone replacement therapy (HT)

Related fact sheets in this series:

- breast cancer risk factors
- racial & ethnic differences
- healthy living
- breast cancer in men

The Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation is not a health care provider and does not give medical advice. The information provided in this material is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or to replace the services of a medical professional.