

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 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 every woman can take that may reduce her risk. These include eating healthy, maintaining a healthy weight, exercising regularly and limiting alcohol intake. 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?
- 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, although it is rare? Less than one of every 100 cases of breast cancer in the U.S. occurs in men.
- in 2008, it is estimated that men will account for 1,990 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 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.

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 89 percent.² This means that 89 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 surviving 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.² 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 2008.

² American Cancer Society, Breast Cancer Facts & Figures 2007-2008.

Your best defense

The best way to find breast cancer in its earliest stages is to routinely check your breasts for signs and symptoms of the disease.

Mammograms are X-ray pictures of the breast. They can find 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, talk with your health care provider about when to start getting mammograms or other screening options, like MRI, and how often to have them.

Clinical breast exam is performed by a health care provider who 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 starting at 40.

Breast self-exam (BSE) is a tool that may help you learn what is normal for you. BSE involves two main steps, looking at and feeling your breasts for any change from normal. If you notice any change, see your health care provider right away. At your next appointment, ask your health care provider to show you the steps for BSE. (For step-by-step BSE instructions, go to www.komen.org/bse.)

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 options with your doctor.

Risk factors:

- being a woman
- getting older
- having a mutation in the BRCA1 or BRCA2 breast cancer genes
- having a personal history of breast or ovarian cancer
- having a family history of breast cancer or ovarian cancer
- having high breast density on a mammogram
- having a previous biopsy showing hyperplasia or carcinoma in situ
- never having children
- having your first child after age 35
- radiation exposure, frequent x-rays in youth
- high bone density
- gaining weight after menopause
- currently or recently using combined estrogen and progestin hormone replacement therapy (HRT)

Related fact sheets in this series:

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