



Breast Cancer

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Breast Cancer: Coping With Fears of Being at Risk

If a friend or family member has breast cancer, are you afraid you're next? Learning more and making lifestyle changes may reduce the fear.

For many women, breast cancer is one of their worst fears. There's no doubt that it is a scary disease. But most women overestimate their risk of getting breast cancer. Experts say that women alive now have about a 13 percent risk of getting breast cancer at some time in their lives.

Here are some things that may help put the risk in context:

- This is a woman's lifetime risk, meaning it's spread throughout your life. Most cases of breast cancer occur in women older than 60.
- Another way to state this is that about 1 out of 8 women will get breast cancer sometime during her life. That means that 7 out of 8 women won't ever get breast cancer.
- About 41,000 women die each year of breast cancer. More than 330,000 women die each year of heart disease.

These numbers only give a general idea of breast cancer risk. The key to coping with a fear of breast cancer is knowing what puts you at risk and then taking steps to lower your risk.



Video Spotlight:

[Different Breast Cancers](#)

[Breast Cancer Treatment:
Get Involved](#)

Breast Cancer

Understand your risks

Just being a woman puts you at risk for breast cancer. (Men can get it, too, but it's rare.) Some things that put you at risk are not in your control. These include:

- **Age.** The risk of breast cancer increases as you get older.
- **A family history of breast cancer**, especially in a mother, sister or daughter.
- **A personal history of breast cancer.** Having it in one breast means you're more likely to get it in the other breast.
- **Starting your period before age 12** or going through menopause after age 55.
- **Having dense breasts.** Your doctor can tell you if your breasts are dense.

You may be able to control some things that increase your risk for breast cancer. Things that increase your risk include:

- Not having children or having your first child after age 30
- Taking hormones after menopause
- Being overweight after menopause
- Not being physically active
- Drinking alcohol. The more you drink, the higher your risk.

Take steps to lower your risk

There's no way to guarantee that you won't get breast cancer. But certain health practices have been shown to lower the risk of cancer. You don't have to be

perfect. Even making a few of these changes could help reduce your breast cancer risk.

- **Don't smoke.** This is the No. 1 thing you can do to improve your health and lower your cancer risk.
- **Stay at a healthy weight for your height.** Try to avoid weight gain, especially around your waist.
- **Get 30 minutes of moderately intense physical activity every day.** Walking, swimming and riding a bike are good choices. But housework, yard work and gardening count, too. Just try to move more. But always check with your doctor before you increase your activity level.
- **Make healthy food choices.** Eat plenty of high-fiber, plant-based foods, such as whole grains, beans, fruits and vegetables. Limit red meat, saturated fat and salt.
- **Limit alcohol to no more than one drink a day** if you drink.
- **Get regular breast cancer screenings** as recommended. Your doctor can tell you how often you need one. Get a mammogram regularly starting at age 40 (or sooner if you're at high risk).

If you're at high risk for breast cancer, talk to your doctor about your choices. You may be able to take medicines or have surgery to lower your breast cancer risk. Your doctor can help you decide if genetic testing is right for you.



Breast Cancer: Dispelling the Myths

With all the myths that are circulating about breast cancer, you may be unsure what to believe. Learn the facts.

Knowledge is one of our best weapons in the fight against breast cancer. Unfortunately, a lot of bad information is still out there. To know your risks, it's important to recognize myths.

Myth: Only women get breast cancer.

Fact: Men can get breast cancer, too, but it's rare. They account for less than 1 percent of all occurrences. Still, the American Cancer Society estimates that about 2,000 American men get breast cancer each year. It's most common in men ages 60 or older, but younger men can get it, too.

Myth: Young women don't get breast cancer.

Fact: Breast cancer usually happens after menopause, but younger women can still get it. More than 178,000 women develop the disease each year. That includes more than 11,000 women under age 40.

Myth: Breast cancer is caused by injury to the breast.

Fact: At times, after an injury, a woman may be found to have a tumor. That doesn't mean the injury caused the tumor. There is no known link between cancer and injury. In rare cases, severe injuries might increase the risk of cancer. For example, scars from chemical burns might play a role in the development of skin cancer.

Myth: Antiperspirants cause breast cancer.

Fact: This urban legend has been around since the early days of the Internet. You may have read e-mails warning you about a connection between cancer and deodorants. There is no research to back these claims.



Myth: If you have a family history of breast cancer, you will develop the disease.

Fact: You may be at higher risk if you have a family history of breast cancer. However, many women who have a family history of breast cancer never develop it. Others are diagnosed with breast cancer, but have no family history. Other risk factors include age and having had breast cancer in the past. Talk to your doctor about your risks.

Bottom line: When in doubt, check it out.

Learn to spot breast cancer myths. These tips can help:

- **Look for evidence.** When you hear a claim, look for medical research to back it up. Don't read too much into a single study without finding other studies to back it up.
- **Find credible sources.** Use reliable sources to check out cancer claims. Try government agencies or other credible organizations. The National Cancer Institute and the American Cancer Society are good places to start. Stay away from anyone selling cancer "cures."
- **Ask your doctor.** Talk to your doctor about your risk factors and ways to prevent disease. Ask when you should have mammograms and other important screenings.

Many Women Are Skipping Breast Exams

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Finding breast cancer early is key to helping those diagnosed live long and healthy lives. Regular mammograms are a way to detect breast cancer early, often before it can be felt. But despite this, many American women still don't get regular mammograms.

Are you one of them? If you are, consider this: A regular mammogram, which is an X-ray of the breast, can detect a breast lump an average two years before you could feel one. For women ages 50 to 74, regular mammograms may increase your odds of surviving breast cancer by 30 percent.

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) recommends women who are not at increased risk for breast cancer get mammograms every two years, starting at age 50 and through age 74. The USPSTF also says that for women younger than 50, the decision to have biennial screening mammograms is an individual one. The American Cancer Society (ACS) recommends annual mammograms starting at age 40. You are encouraged to talk to your doctor about the best time to start your mammogram screening.

Why do women avoid mammograms?

Fear

Too often, women are simply afraid to confront the issue. They may be afraid of the procedure or afraid that they'll discover they have cancer. Women who have had them will tell you mammograms are more uncomfortable than painful. Radiology professionals are taught how to reduce physical discomfort, protect privacy and respect personal modesty.

Misinformation

Many women think that if their first mammogram is negative, they don't need any more mammograms. Some women think estrogen causes cancer and conclude that once they reach menopause, they don't



need mammograms any more. The fact is, a woman's chance of developing breast cancer increases as a woman ages.

The chance that an American woman will develop breast cancer by age 40 is one in 233. By age 50, that risk increases to one in 69. By age 69, a woman's risk of getting breast cancer is one in 29.

Women also believe that if they have no history of breast cancer in their family, then they are not at risk. In fact, most women diagnosed with breast cancer do not have known risk factors.

Money

If your reason for not having a mammogram is related to money, check with your health insurance company to see what's covered. Other options may be to check into state and local health programs. For example, some state and local health programs and employers provide mammograms free or at a low cost. Information on low-cost or free mammography screening programs is available through the National Cancer Institute's Cancer Information Service at 1-800-4-CANCER.

You also can call your local chapter of the American Cancer Society or call its toll-free number, 1-800-ACS-2345, for information about low-cost or free mammograms.

