

## Know the Facts about Breast Cancer

### **How common is breast cancer in the United States?**

Breast cancer is the most common cancer in women, aside from skin cancer. For current information and statistics, access the American Cancer Society Web site, [www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov), Breast Cancer Facts and Figures, 2006.

### ***The most common risk factors:***

**Age.** The risk of breast cancer increases as a woman grows older. The risk is especially high for women age 60 and older. Breast cancer is uncommon in women younger than age 35. There is some evidence to suggest young African American women are at greater risk for breast cancer than young white women.

**Personal History.** Women who have had breast cancer and women with a history of breast disease (not cancer, but a condition that may predispose them to cancer) may develop it again.

**Family History.** The risk of getting breast cancer increases for a woman whose mother, sister, daughter, or two or more close relatives have had the disease. It is important to know how old they were at the time they were diagnosed.

**The Breast Cancer Genes.** Some individuals, both women and men, may be born with an "alteration" (or change) in one of two genes that are important for regulating breast cell growth. Individuals who inherit an alteration in the BRCA1 or BRCA2 gene are at an "inherited" higher risk for breast cancer. They also may pass this alteration on to their children. It is very rare. Scientists estimate that only about 5-10 percent of all breast cancers are due to genetic changes. One out of two women with these changes are likely to develop breast cancer. Women with a family history of breast cancer are encouraged to speak to a genetics counselor to determine the pros and cons of genetic testing.

*The next 5 risk factors all involve estrogen, a hormone that naturally occurs in every woman. At the time menstruation begins, women start to produce larger amounts of estrogen and will continue to do so until they reach menopause. Estrogen appears to play a key role in breast cancer. Although estrogen doesn't actually cause breast cancer, it may stimulate the growth of cancer cells. Estrogen-related risk factors are:*

**Having an early first period.** Women who begin menstruating before age 12 are at increased risk of developing breast cancer. The more menstrual cycles a woman has over her lifetime, the more likely she is to get the disease.

**Having a first pregnancy after age 25 or 35.** Although early pregnancies may help lower the chances of getting breast cancer, particularly before the age of 25, these same hormonal changes after age 35 may contribute to the incidence of breast cancer.

**Having no children.** Women who experience continuous menstrual cycles until menopause are at a higher than average risk.

**Use of Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT).**

Based on the Women's Health Initiative Study (2002), women do appear to have an increased risk of breast cancer while they are on HRT and a short time thereafter, compared to those who have never used postmenopausal HRT. This is based on a study of 16,000 healthy postmenopausal women aged 50 to 79 who were taking either estrogen plus progestin as HRT or a placebo (an inactive pill).

**Use of Oral Contraceptives (OCs) and Breast Cancer.** Current or former use of OCs among women ages 35 to 64 did not significantly increase the risk of breast cancer. The findings were similar for white and black women. Data also show that former OC use does not increase the risk of breast cancer later in life.

***Other risk factors - and lifestyle choices to avoid them***

*Common to all women are daily lifestyle decisions that may affect breast cancer risk. These day-to-day choices involve factors such as poor diet, insufficient physical activity, alcohol use, and smoking. Besides possibly reducing breast cancer risk, lifestyle improvements represent smart steps for a healthier life, since they can help prevent heart disease, diabetes, and many other chronic, life-threatening conditions.*

**Decrease your daily fat intake** - especially **saturated** or **hydrogenated fats**.

Eat leaner meats and limit red meat. Reducing your fat intake helps prevent other health problems such as heart disease and stroke and may reduce your chance of developing breast and colon cancers.

**Increase fiber in your diet.** Fiber is found in whole grains, vegetables, and fruits. This type of diet is beneficial for your heart and can help prevent other cancers such as colon cancer.

**Eat fresh fruits and vegetables.** In addition to their fiber content, fruits and vegetables have antioxidant properties and micronutrients that may help prevent some cancers.

**Limit alcohol.** Evidence suggests that a small increase in risk exists for women who average two or more drinks per day (beer, wine, and distilled liquor).

**Stay active.** The U.S. Surgeon General has recently reported that you can help prevent many health problems by engaging in a moderate amount of physical activity (such as taking a brisk, 30-minute walk) on most days of the week. Strive to maintain the body weight recommended by a health professional, since excess fat may stimulate estrogen production.

**Don't smoke.** Although smoking doesn't cause breast cancer, it can increase the chance of blood clots, heart disease, and other cancers that may spread to the breast.

Having one or two of these risk factors doesn't mean a woman will develop breast cancer. But knowing her personal risk factor profile and understanding what it

means will help her and her doctor plan a course of action that may reduce her chances of ever getting the disease or, at least, to detect it in its earliest, most treatable stages. For additional information on risk factors, access the American Cancer Society Website, [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org), Breast Cancer Facts and Figures, 2006.

## Know the Facts about *Early Detection*

### The Importance of Early Detection

Breast cancer is the most common cancer diagnosed in women in America. When breast cancer is detected early and treated promptly, suffering and ultimately the loss of life can be significantly reduced. Women are encouraged to ask their doctors and other health care providers about mammography screening. Mammography (an x-ray picture of the breast) is the single most effective method to detect breast changes that may be cancer, long before physical symptoms can be seen or felt. For early stage breast cancer, there are more treatment options, treatment can be less disfiguring and less toxic, and survival is improved.

As women age, their risk of breast cancer increases. For most women, high quality mammography screening should begin at age 40. As risk factors vary in everyone, each woman and her doctor should discuss the plan that's right for her. Most organizations recommend screening every 1 to 2 years; some recommend it take place every year. Screening should continue throughout a woman's lifetime.

In addition to the use of mammography, health care providers should also examine a woman's breasts, called a clinical breast examination (CBE), as part of routine health care to search for any abnormalities that may be missed by mammography. Breast self-examination (BSE) may alert a woman to any changes in her breasts, but it is not a substitute for mammography screening. The value of BSE is that it helps a woman become familiar with how her breasts normally feel and to notice any changes.

### What barriers keep women from getting mammograms on a routine basis?

Studies have identified a number of barriers to mammography screening. Some can be overcome with health education; others require programs to make mammography more accessible for women. The top four barriers, in women's words, are:

- *"I don't need a mammogram because my doctor has never recommended I have one."*
- *"I've never thought about it."*
- *"I have no breast problems, so mammography isn't necessary."*
- *"I don't have enough time."*

### Other barriers include:

- Fear about pain from the procedure.
- Fear of a diagnosis of breast cancer.
- Concerns about screening costs.

- Concerns about the financial burden of diagnostic procedures and treatment, if needed.
- No recent clinical breast examination or Pap test.
- No routine source of health care.
- Difficulty taking time off from work to be screened.
- Living a far distance from the screening site.

*Source: The Manual of Intervention Strategies to Increase Mammography Rates, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention with the Prudential Center for Health Care Research.*

### **Is mammography screening the only way to detect breast cancer?**

Mammography screening remains the best available method to detect breast cancer early. However, no medical test is always 100 percent accurate, and mammography is no exception. Research is under way to improve the technology to lead to better accuracy and to create new technologies.

### **Will health insurance pay for screening mammograms?**

Regular screening mammograms are covered by the U.S. government's Medicare and Medicaid programs and other private health insurance plans (women should check their own insurance plans for individual details). Free or low-cost mammograms are available for women without health insurance in many locations. For a program near you, contact the CDC at (888) 842-6355.

### **Will Medicare pay for screening mammograms?**

Yes. Medicare covers mammography screening every year for women age 40 and older who are Medicare recipients. Yet, eligible women and their doctors may not now about this important benefit. A series of publications regarding this benefit are available in English and Spanish. For ore information about Medicare coverage, contact the Medicare toll-free hotline at (800) MEDICARE or the Medicare Website, [www.medicare.gov](http://www.medicare.gov).

### **How can women get low-cost or free mammograms?**

For information on low- or no cost mammography screening, contact the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) at (888) 842-6355 or visit their Web site at [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov). Women seeking mammograms at a reduced rate are urged to make their appointment early in the year, as space may be limited. To find a breast-imaging facility, contact the National Cancer Institute at (800) 4-CANCER. For more information, visit [www.nbcam.org](http://www.nbcam.org).

For more information about mammography screening, please refer to American Cancer Society's Website at [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org).

Source: <http://www.nbcam.com/aboutBC.cfm> 3 October 2006