

A close-up photograph of a hand with a pink awareness ribbon tied around the index and middle fingers. The background is a soft-focus teal and white.

# Taking Control: Reducing Your Risk for Breast Cancer

Cancer is caused by cells that grow out of control. Breast cancer is a type of cancer that starts in the breast. There are different types of breast cancer depending on the kind of cells in the breast that grew out of control. Breast cancer can spread to the lymph nodes and other parts of the body.

## What are the risk factors for getting breast cancer?



There are many risk factors for breast cancer – some are outside of your control but there are several things that you can do to reduce your risk. Even though you cannot change all your risk factors, it's important to understand your risks and talk with your doctor about them. Risks include:

- Being born female.
- Getting older. Most breast cancers are found in women ages 55 and older.
- Hereditary risk – this means you have had a close blood family member with breast cancer or you have inherited gene changes from a parent.
- Being taller.
- Having dense breast tissue. Women usually find out they have dense breasts after their first mammogram.
- Having your first period before age 12.
- Beginning menopause (you haven't had a period in a full year) after age 55.
- Having other non-cancerous breast conditions like fibroids, simple cyst, and other things.
- Having had radiation to your chest for another kind of cancer.

## Do you have questions?

Call our 24-hour Nurse Advice Line. We are here to help you.  
(800) 606-9880 TTY: 711

It is normal to feel anxious or worried when thinking about cancer. What is important is that you don't let that anxiety get in the way of taking care of you. There are several things you can do to reduce your risk of breast cancer. These things will improve your overall health and reduce risk of other serious illness. Take control of your worries and your risk with the following steps:

- Reduce alcohol use. Women who have 1 serving of alcohol a day have a small increase in risk and those who drink more than 1 serving a day an even larger risk.
- Exercise regularly. Even a couple hours a week can be helpful, but more is better. Adults should aim for 150-300 minutes of moderate activity or 75-150 minutes of very intense activity weekly.
- Maintain a healthy weight – especially after menopause.
- If you are planning to have children, consider breastfeeding. Breastfeeding may slightly lower your risk of breast cancer especially if you breastfeed for 12 months or more.
- Talk to your doctor about the safest birth control options to reduce risk.
- Talk to your doctor if you are considering hormone therapy for menopause. Some therapies may increase risk.



### Screening and early detection

Screening refers to tests, like mammograms that x-ray the breast, and exams by doctors to find cancer in people who don't have symptoms. Screening can lead to early detection of cancer so you can start treatment sooner. The size, how much the cancer has spread, and genetic factors are the most important in predicting the outlook for someone diagnosed with cancer. Early detection often catches cancer while it's small and before it has spread – this means a much better outlook and sometimes easier treatment process for the patient.

Types of screening:

- Mammograms – all women should get a mammogram every other year starting at age 40 through age 74.
- Clinical breast exams – all women should expect to have a clinical breast exam completed as part of their well woman annual exam by their primary care doctor or gynecologist.
- Breast self-awareness – all women should report any changes you detect in your breasts to your doctor
  - The most common symptom of breast cancer is a new lump in the breast. Even though most lumps are not cancer, only your doctor can tell for sure.
  - Other symptoms include: swelling of all or part of the breast, breast or nipple pain different than your normal menstrual cycle or with pregnancy, nipple turning inward or discharge that isn't breast milk, skin changes of the breast or nipple (red, dry, flakey, or thickening), and swelling of nodes under the arm or near the collar bone.

Talk to your doctor if you are younger than age 40 and have risk factors. Your doctor may recommend starting mammograms earlier if you have specific higher risk factors.

It may feel like getting a mammogram can be scarier than not knowing if something is wrong. Because of this, you may feel the impulse to avoid getting your routine screenings. Timely screenings give women the best chance at being well. Take control of your health by getting your screening. It could save your life.

