



breast cancer information

What is breast cancer?

Breast cancer is the result of cells in the breast becoming malignant and developing into a tumor. Although the disease occurs mostly in women, men can get breast cancer, but the occurrence is rare.

What causes breast cancer?

We do not know yet what causes breast cancer. Researchers are working hard to discover why and how certain changes in DNA can cause normal breast cells to become cancerous, and to unlock the secret to understanding the genetic basis of breast cancer.

Can breast cancer be prevented?

There is no certain way. However, women can learn the risk factors (see below) and promote early detection with regular breast self-exams, clinical checkups and mammograms.

What are the risk factors for breast cancer?

- The highest risk factors are being female and aging.
- Menstrual history – if you began menstruating before age 12, or completed menopause after age 55
- Family history – if you have a mother, sister or daughter who has had the disease, or a close relative, such as a cousin or an aunt with history of breast cancer
- Oral contraceptives – slight increased risk if you are currently using the pill or have used it in the last 10 years
- Children – if you have never had children or had your first child after age 30
- Alcohol – if you consume two or more alcoholic drinks a day
- Being overweight – especially after menopause
- Chest radiation therapy – if you had this as a child or as an adult
- Genetic mutations – if you carry the BRCA1 or BRCA2 mutations

What are the symptoms of breast cancer?

- A new lump or mass
- A hard mass that has irregular edges and is painless is more likely to be cancerous. (Cancers can sometimes be tender, soft and rounded, although it is rare.)
- A discharge, other than breast milk
- Redness or pain in the nipple, or on the breast skin
- Retraction of the nipple (turning upward)
- Swelling of the breast that is generalized with no distinct lump



What are the key statistics about breast cancer?

- In 2005, the American Cancer Society estimates that 211,240 new cases of invasive breast cancer (Stages I-IV) will be diagnosed among women in the United States, with 40,410 deaths. There will be approximately 58,490 new cases of DCIS – ductal carcinoma in Situ (Stage O), the noninvasive, earliest form of breast cancer.
- In men, the ACS estimates 1,690 new cases with 460 deaths.
- Breast cancer is the second leading cause of cancer death in women, after lung cancer.
- Approximately 5 to 10 percent of breast cancers are inherited.
- Approximately 80 percent of women who get breast cancer do not have a family history of the disease.
- Breast cancer is the most common form of cancer in women (excluding skin cancer).
- In her lifetime, one out of seven women will develop breast cancer.
- Only 6 percent of breast cancer cases occur in women under age 40.
- In women whose breast cancer is diagnosed at an early state, 98 percent survive more than five years.

What is the incidence of breast cancer in younger women?

While the lifetime risk of a woman developing breast cancer is one in eight, the actual risk varies depending on age. The younger you are, the less likely you are to develop the disease now.

At what age should I begin to examine my breasts?

Women should do a monthly breast self-exam (BSE) beginning at age 20. The best time for premenopausal women is a week after each menstrual period.

Do young women have a different type of breast cancer than older women?

No. However, young women are often diagnosed with more advanced cases of breast cancer. This may be due to a delay in diagnosis, in part because young women may not be in a regular screening program. The mistake many young women make is to forget that mammograms are only part of a three-step early detection program for breast cancer, i.e., consistent, monthly self-exams, yearly exams by a professional, and mammography beginning at age 40.

Why is it recommended that women under age 40 not get regular mammograms?

The breast of young women contain many glands and ligaments, which appear dense on a mammogram. This radiologic density makes it more difficult to spot tumors, or to tell cancerous conditions. With age, the glandular and fibrous tissues of the breast gradually give way to fatty tissue. Because fatty tissue has less radiological density, mammograms can more easily “see” into the breast tissue and detect abnormal changes.

Although mammograms are not generally recommended as part of regular screening for women under age 40, a young woman who thinks she is at risk, or who sees or feels changes in her breasts, should speak with her doctor about additional screening, including mammography.

Are mammograms safe?

Yes. Over 10 years ago, radiation dosage was significantly higher than it is now, so women had grounds for concern about the safety of mammograms. Today’s specialized mammography units produce better, more accurate images with a considerably lower X-ray dose than the general purpose X-ray previously used. Since 1994, all U.S. mammography facilities must be certified by the FDA to ensure uniform quality of procedures and a safe level of radiation dosage.