



After skin cancer, breast cancer is the most common form of cancer among American women. The number of new cases diagnosed exceeds 180,000 each year, and more than 40,000 women die from the disease on average each year. That's why it's important to know as much as possible about the risk factors, signs and symptoms of breast cancer and screening methods. The more you know, the better your chance of catching the cancer before it has spread and getting treated in time.

Know your risk factors

The first step in breast cancer detection is to know your level of risk. While the precise causes of breast cancer are not known, it is clear that as you age, your chance of developing breast cancer increases. In fact, the majority of women who develop breast cancer don't have any risk factors other than their older age. Breast cancer most often strikes women over age 50, and the risk is greatest for women over age 60. Also, Caucasian women are more at risk for this type of cancer than are African-American or Asian women.

Studies show you are at higher risk for breast cancer if you have any of the following conditions:

- You've had breast cancer before.
- Family members have had breast cancer.
- You've had a breast biopsy showing certain types of benign breast conditions.
- Specific genetic changes have been passed through your family.

Did You Know?
More than 1,000 men are diagnosed with breast cancer each year.

Other factors that can increase your risk are:

- Long-term exposure to estrogen.
- Use of DES, a synthetic form of estrogen used between 1940 and 1971.
- Having children later in life, after about age 30.
- Dense breast tissue.
- Exposure to radiation therapy before age 30, especially for treatment of Hodgkin's disease.
- Drinking alcohol.

If you'd like to know more about breast cancer risk factors, visit www.cancer.gov/cancer_information/cancer_type/breast.

Look for signs and symptoms

Early breast cancer can be hard to detect. In the early stages, it usually doesn't cause any pain. In fact, you may have no symptoms at all. That's why it's important to regularly examine yourself. You then have a better chance of discovering changes that occur as the cancer grows. *You should call your doctor right away if any of the following changes occur:*

- You find a lump or thickened tissue in or around the breast or underarm area.
- The size or shape of a breast changes.



- The nipple has a discharge, is tender, or is pulled back (inverted) into the breast.
- There are ridges or pitting in the surface of the breast, so the skin's texture is similar to that of an orange peel.
- Any change in the feel or look of the skin of the breast, areola or nipple (e.g. red, swollen, warm or scaly.)

Discuss screening techniques with your doctor

Just because you don't have any of the listed risk factors, it doesn't mean you're in the clear. You still need to follow screening recommendations and look for signs of breast cancer as instructed by your physician. In nearly all cases, regular, thorough screenings greatly improve your chances of catching the cancer early, when effective treatment is still possible. These are the currently available screening techniques and recommendations for how often they should be performed:

- **Mammogram**

The National Cancer Institute recommends that women over age 40 get a mammogram on a regular basis, every 1 to 2 years. A mammogram is a special X-ray that can show changes in breast tissue early on in women who have not had any symptoms, before the change can be felt. A mammogram is currently the best tool for catching breast cancer before symptoms appear. It isn't guaranteed to detect problems early, but studies have proven that mammograms do lower the chance of dying from breast cancer. If you are at a higher-than-average risk of breast cancer, meaning that you have one or more risk factors, ask your doctor if you should begin screening before age 40 and how often you should be screened.

- **Clinical Breast Examination (CBE)**

The National Cancer Institute recommends that adult women of any age ask their doctor to perform a CBE. A CBE takes only a minute and is a simple, noninvasive technique. The doctor will feel each breast and underarm to look for any lumps or other unusual changes. Ask your doctor about planning your personal schedule for mammograms and CBEs.

- **Breast Self-Exam (BSE)**

This is a simple exam you can give yourself at home. To learn how to properly perform a BSE, ask your doctor and/or visit www.familydoctor.org/healthfacts/018/index.html. The BSE should be done in a consistent manner and at the same point in your menstrual cycle each month. If you're 40 or older, or at higher risk, a monthly BSE is not a substitute for regular mammograms and CBEs by your doctor.

Make regular screenings a priority

By keeping a close watch and monitoring the health of your breasts through regular screenings, you greatly improve your chance of finding breast cancer early and surviving. For information about early detection, treatment options, clinical trials, genetics and more, visit the National Cancer Institute and National Institutes of Health breast cancer home page at www.cancer.gov/cancer_information/cancer_type/breast. For recent news on breast cancer topics, visit www.nationalbreastcancer.org.

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