American Cancer Society®

# Breast Cancer Fact Sheet

## for Patients and Caregivers



Breast cancer can start in any part of one or both breasts. For females in the US, breast cancer is the most common cancer (after skin cancer) and the second-leading cause of cancer death (after lung cancer).

## Risk Factors

**Risk factors for breast cancer that you cannot change include:**

**Gender:** This is the main risk factor for breast cancer. Males can also get breast cancer, but it is much more common in females.

**Age:** As a person gets older, their risk of breast cancer goes up. Most breast cancers are found in females age 55 or older.

**Personal or family history:** Someone who has had breast cancer in the past or has a parent, sibling, or child with breast cancer has a higher risk of getting it. Having more than one close blood relative increases the risk even more. It's important to know that most people with breast cancer don't have a close blood relative with the disease.

**Inheriting gene changes:** Certain gene changes (most commonly in *BRCA1* and *BRCA2* genes) can create a higher risk for breast cancer.

**Starting menstruation early or having late menopause:** There may be a higher risk due to longer exposure to the hormones estrogen and progesterone.

**Having dense breast tissue**: People whose breasts appear dense on mammograms have a higher risk of breast cancer. Dense breast tissue can also make it harder to see cancers on mammograms.

**Having radiation to the chest:** Females who were treated with radiation therapy to the chest, especially as a teen or young adult, have a much higher risk for breast cancer.

**Some benign breast conditions:** Certain non-cancerous breast conditions can increase the risk of getting breast cancer.

**Lifestyle-related risk factors for breast cancer:**

- Drinking alcohol
- Excess body weight, especially after menopause
- Not being physically active
- Getting hormone therapy after menopause with estrogen and progesterone therapy
- Never having children or having a first child after age 30
- Certain types of birth control

## Prevention

There is no sure way to prevent breast cancer, and some risk factors can't be changed, such as being born female, age, personal or family history of the disease, and inherited gene changes. But there are things a person can do that can help lower the risk for breast cancer. Avoiding or limiting alcohol, getting regular physical activity, and getting to and staying at a healthy weight might help lower risk.

If you have a family history or inherited gene changes, your health care provider may have you see a genetic counselor or recommend certain medicines or procedures. They can help you better understand your risks and make informed decisions about your care.

## Screening and Early Detection

Screening is a process used to look for cancer in people who have no symptoms. The earlier breast cancer is found, the better the chances for successful treatment. The American Cancer Society recommends the following for finding breast cancer early in women at average risk:

- **Women ages 40 to 44** should have the choice to start yearly breast cancer screening with a mammogram (x-ray of the breast).
- **Women ages 45 to 54** should get a mammogram every year.
- **Women 55 and older** can switch to a mammogram every two years, or can continue yearly screening. Screening should continue as long as a woman is in good health and is expected to live at least 10 more years.
- If you are getting a mammogram for breast cancer screening, you should understand what to expect and what the test can and cannot do. You should also be familiar with how your breasts normally look and feel and report any changes to a health care provider.
- Screening MRI and screening mammograms are recommended for certain women at high risk of breast cancer. Talk to a health care provider for more information.

## Signs and Symptoms

The most common sign of breast cancer is a new lump or mass. While most lumps or masses are not cancer, it is important to have a health care provider check them. Other signs of breast cancer can include swelling of all or part of a breast (even if no lump is felt); skin dimpling (sometimes looking like an orange peel); nipple pain or retraction (turning inward); nipple discharge (other than breast milk); nipple or breast skin that is red, dry, flaking, or thickened; or swollen lymph nodes under the arm or near the collar bone. Have any breast changes checked by a health care provider.



## Treatment

Treatment for breast cancer depends on the type and stage of the cancer and results of testing that might be done on the tumor, as well as the person's age, other health problems, and personal choices. If you have breast cancer, talk to your doctor about the best treatment for you.

## Living With Breast Cancer

Breast cancer affects a person's quality of life. Physical, social, mental health, spiritual, and money issues can come up at any time.

People with breast cancer may be helped by palliative care at any time. Palliative care focuses on helping manage symptoms, addressing issues, and improving quality of life.

Good communication between a person with cancer and the health care team is important and involves:

- Asking and answering questions
- Working together to set care goals
- Making shared decisions
- Managing side effects and other issues
- Scheduling follow-up tests and care

Visit the American Cancer Society website at **cancer.org/cancer/breast-cancer** or call us at **1-800-227-2345** to learn more. We're here when you need us.



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