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Prevention Series

Breast Cancer

How to reduce your risk



Let's Make Cancer History

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Breast Cancer

How to reduce your risk

Breast cancer develops in abnormal cells in the breast tissue. These cancer cells begin to multiply out of control and form a lump or tumour.

Nobody knows the exact causes of breast cancer, but we do know that some people have a higher risk of developing it.

The information in this brochure can help you understand more about breast cancer and what you can do to reduce your risk of this disease.

Know the risks

There is no single cause of breast cancer, but some factors appear to increase the risk of developing it. Having risk factors doesn't mean you will develop breast cancer. It means that your *chances* of developing it are higher.

Most women who develop breast cancer have no risk factors other than simply being a woman and getting older (especially being over 50). Other risk factors for breast cancer include:

- having had breast cancer before
- family history of breast cancer (especially in a mother, sister or daughter diagnosed before menopause or if hereditary mutations are present in certain genes, such as BRCA1 or BRCA2)
- family history of ovarian cancer
- an above-average exposure to the hormone estrogen, which your body naturally produces, perhaps because you:
 - > have never given birth or gave birth for the first time after age 30
 - > began menstruating at a young age
 - > reached menopause later than average
 - > have taken hormone replacement therapy (estrogen plus progestin)
- dense breast tissue (as shown on a mammogram)

- a history of breast biopsies showing certain breast changes, such as an increased number of abnormal cells that are not cancerous (*atypical hyperplasia*)
- radiation treatment to the chest area (for example, to treat Hodgkin lymphoma), especially before age 30

Some factors slightly increase your risk of breast cancer. You may be at slightly higher risk if you:

- are obese (especially after menopause)
- drink alcohol
- take birth control pills (*the Pill*)

Researchers continue to study many other possible risk factors for breast cancer, such as how your risk is affected by diet and physical activity habits. Other factors under study include smoking, especially breathing second-hand smoke, and exposure to certain chemicals, such as PCBs (*polychlorinated biphenyls*).

Who gets breast cancer?

Breast cancer is the most common cancer in Canadian women. It can happen at any age, but most cases occur in women over the age of 50.

Breast cancer can also be found in men, although this is very rare.

Reduce your risk

You can't change most of the risk factors for breast cancer, such as your family medical history or if you started your period at a young age. But you may be able to change some factors, such as how much you weigh or what you eat and drink. Making these changes isn't always easy and there's no guarantee that you won't develop breast cancer. But you will be doing what you can to reduce your risk.

Maintain a healthy body weight

If you are post-menopausal, being obese increases your risk of developing breast cancer. For many women, losing weight or staying at a healthy weight can be very hard. For post-menopausal women, weight gain can be even harder to control.

Talk to your doctor about what is a healthy weight for you and ways to reach or maintain it.

More research is needed to confirm the role of obesity as a risk factor for premenopausal women.

Be physically active

Some studies have shown that regular physical activity may lower the risk of breast cancer. More research is needed to find out how much and how strenuous the physical activity needs to be to reduce risk.

Eat vegetables and fruit

More research is needed to better understand the role of diet in breast cancer, but there is some evidence that eating lots of vegetables and fruit may reduce the risk of developing cancer in women with a family history of breast cancer. It may also be more important in protecting against hormone receptor-positive tumours.

Don't drink too much alcohol

Studies show that drinking moderate amounts of alcohol slightly increases the risk of breast cancer. If you choose to drink, limit it to less than a drink a day. The more you drink each day, the greater your risk.

Avoid prescription hormones if you can

Talk to your doctor about the risks, benefits and side effects of prescription hormones so that you can make informed decisions about your health.

HRT

Avoid taking hormone replacement therapy (HRT) unless you have severe menopausal symptoms that haven't been helped by any other treatment. If you and your doctor decide that the benefits of HRT outweigh the risks, take the lowest possible dose for the shortest period of time in order to ease your symptoms.

The Pill

The increase in the risk of breast cancer from birth control pills used today is small, but you may also want to talk to your doctor about how long to stay on the Pill. Depending on your age and other risk factors, you may decide that a different method of birth control is better for you. Within 10 years of going off the Pill, your risk of breast cancer goes back to average. The major benefits of the Pill are preventing unwanted pregnancy and reducing cramps and bleeding during your period. Other benefits include a decrease in risk for uterine (endometrial) and ovarian cancer.

Don't smoke and avoid second-hand smoke

Experts aren't sure whether there is a risk of breast cancer from smoking. Some think that second-hand smoke may increase your risk. Avoiding tobacco smoke completely is something you can do for your health that could also reduce your risk of breast cancer.

Consider breast-feeding

Studies have shown that lactation (producing breast milk) reduces the risk of breast cancer. The benefit seems to increase with the amount of time you spend breast-feeding over your lifetime. Many different reasons will affect whether you choose to breast-feed and it may not be possible for every mother and baby.

Talk to your doctor about your risk

All women should talk to their doctor about their risk of developing breast cancer. You don't have to have a family history of the disease to be at risk – simply being a woman and getting older means that you could develop breast cancer. Your doctor can help you understand what other risk factors you have, and tell you more about tests to diagnose breast cancer early.

A very small number of women are at high risk of developing breast cancer, usually because of their genetic make-up or because of a very strong family history of the disease. If you are one of these women, you may have the option to have:

- screening tests earlier or more often than average
- genetic risk assessment
- some preventive (*prophylactic*) treatment such as taking anti-estrogen drugs or prophylactic surgeries

Questions to ask your doctor about breast cancer

What are my personal risk factors?

Does my family history put me at higher than average risk?

What can I do to reduce my risk?

What tests should I have?

What are the risks involved?

What happens if my results are not normal?

Is there a cost for the test and if so, how much?

How often should I be tested?

Follow breast cancer screening guidelines

Screening is the early detection of cancer by testing or checking for disease when you don't have any symptoms. Screening tests for breast cancer can help find it at its earliest, most treatable stages.

It's important to know that no screening test for cancer is 100% accurate. For example, a screening test can sometimes show cancer when there isn't, or not show cancer when there is. But overall, screening tests save lives.

The most reliable tests used to find breast cancer early are mammography and clinical breast examination.

Mammography

Mammography is an examination of the breasts using a low-dose x-ray. Mammography pictures (*mammograms*) show detailed images and views of the breast taken from different angles. The breast is placed between two plastic plates. The plates are then pressed together to flatten the breast. This may be uncomfortable, but it lasts only a few seconds. Compressing the breast tissue helps make the images clearer while using as little radiation as possible.

Clinical breast examination (CBE)

A CBE is a physical examination of the breasts by a trained healthcare professional.

Breast cancer screening guidelines

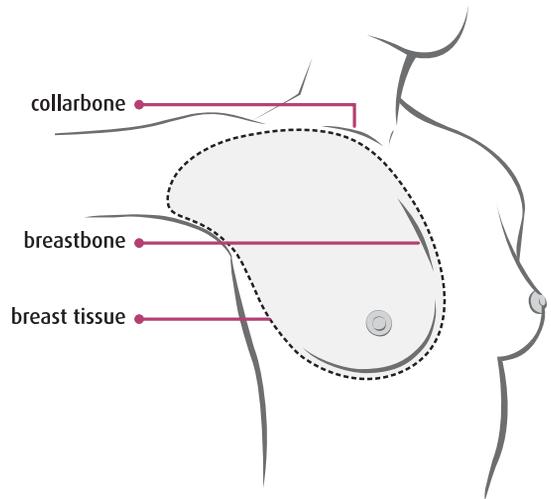
If you are:	You should:
40 to 49	Have a clinical breast examination by a trained healthcare professional at least every 2 years. Talk to your doctor about your risk of breast cancer, along with the benefits and risks of mammography.
50 to 69	Have a clinical breast examination by a trained healthcare professional at least every 2 years. Have a mammogram every 2 years.
70 or older	Talk to your doctor about how often you should be tested for breast cancer.

Breast screening programs vary among the provinces and territories. Ask your doctor about the screening tests or programs in your area. Many women are alive today because they have had regular screening tests for breast cancer.

Know your breasts

No matter what your age, breast health starts with knowing your breasts. Be aware of what is normal for your breasts even if you are having regular screening tests. Many women discover their own breast cancer through changes in the look and feel of their breasts.

Breast tissue covers an area larger than just the breast. It extends up to the collarbone and from the armpit across to the breastbone in the centre of the chest. The breasts sit on the chest muscles that cover the ribs.



Become familiar with your breast tissue by looking at and feeling your breasts. Experts used to suggest that this should be done by following a particular method every month. Research has shown that this isn't necessary. There really isn't a right or wrong way to check your breasts, as long as you get to know the whole area of your breast tissue – up to your collarbone, under your armpits

and including your nipples – well enough to notice changes. So get to know your breasts and what is normal for you, any way that works best for you.

It may be normal for your breasts to be lumpy or tender before your period. Breast tissue changes with age, too. Understanding what is normal for you will help you recognize changes and know what to report to your doctor.

Report changes to your doctor

Most breast lumps are not breast cancer, but see your doctor if you notice any of these changes to your breast:

- a lump or swelling in the breast or armpit
- a change in breast size or shape
- dimpling or puckering of the skin
- redness, swelling or increased warmth in the breast
- a nipple turning inwards
- discharge from the nipple
- crusting or scaling on the nipple

If you report a change to your breasts to your doctor, your doctor will do a physical examination and may send you to have other tests.

Most lumps are not cancer

Waiting for test results isn't easy. If you've reported a change to your doctor, or your mammogram shows something abnormal, you'll need to have more tests to find out whether it's cancer or not. The problem may be something much less serious than cancer (for example, a cyst).

Find out more

With research, we are always learning more about who is at risk for breast cancer and how to reduce this risk. Contact us for the most up-to-date information about reducing your risk of breast cancer or detecting it early:

- Call an information specialist toll-free at **1 888 939-3333** Monday to Friday 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.
- E-mail us at **info@cis.cancer.ca**.
- Visit our website at **www.cancer.ca**.



