



Canadian  
Cancer  
Society

Société  
canadienne  
du cancer

# Early Detection and Screening

*Facts for women*



Let's Make Cancer History

1 888 939-3333 | [www.cancer.ca](http://www.cancer.ca)

## Early Detection and Screening

### *Facts for women*

It's hard to say why one person gets cancer and another does not. It may seem that cancer can't be avoided, but there are things that you can do to reduce your risk of the disease. You can start by living a healthy lifestyle and taking charge of your health.

This brochure describes four common cancers in women that can be detected early by screening tests or by having signs and symptoms checked by your doctor: **breast**, **cervical**, **colorectal** and **skin**. Many symptoms can be caused by problems that are much less serious than cancer. See your doctor to be sure. If cancer can't be prevented, treatment is more likely to be successful if it's found early.

## Early detection and screening

**Early detection** means finding cancer at an early stage. When cancer is found early, it is often easier to treat. Recognizing symptoms and getting regular checkups help detect cancer early. Be aware of your body and don't ignore any changes. The sooner you report symptoms to your doctor, the sooner a problem can be dealt with.

**Screening** is the early detection of cancer by testing or checking for disease when you don't have any symptoms. Many types of cancer don't have a screening test, but some cancers can be found before you've even noticed that something might be wrong. Screening tests can help find cancer at its earliest, most treatable stages. Some screening tests can also help detect precancerous conditions that can be treated before cancer develops. If a screening test shows something unusual, follow-up tests will be needed.

Screening programs that offer screening tests for certain types of cancer are available across Canada. Programs can vary from province to province. These screening programs are offered to people in specific age groups who don't have any signs or symptoms of cancer. If you have a family history of a specific cancer you may be at a higher risk for developing cancer and could be tested at an earlier age or more often. Talk to your doctor about a personal plan of testing.

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.

## Breast cancer

Breast cancer starts in the cells of the breast tissue. Breast tissue in women 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.

Breast cancer is the most commonly diagnosed cancer in women in Canada. It can also be found in men but this is very rare.

Breast cancer can happen at any age, but most cases occur in women over the age of 50. Many women are alive and well today because their breast cancer was found and treated early.

### *What you can do*

The most reliable tests used to find breast cancer early are:

- **mammography:** a low-dose x-ray of the breasts
- **clinical breast examination (CBE):** a physical examination of the breasts by a trained healthcare professional

Breast screening programs vary among the provinces and territories. Your doctor can tell you more about the screening tests or programs in your area.

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

Some women have a higher than average risk for breast cancer. Talk to your doctor about your risk and a personal plan of testing. It may make sense to consider getting tested earlier or more often if:

- You have had breast cancer before.
- You have a history of breast biopsies showing certain breast changes, such as an increased number of abnormal cells which are not cancerous (*atypical hyperplasia*).
- You have a 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).

You can also be aware of how your breasts normally look and feel so that you can notice any changes, even if you are getting tested regularly. Keep in mind that your breasts may feel different at different times of your menstrual cycle. They might become lumpy just before your period. Breast tissue changes with age, too. Learning what is normal for you will help you know what changes to see your doctor about.

## What to watch for

No matter what your age, breast health starts with knowing your breasts.

For most women, finding a lump in their breast is the most common sign of breast cancer. If it's painful, it's usually a symptom of a benign condition, but it should be checked by your doctor. Most lumps are not cancer. These signs and symptoms may be caused by breast cancer or another breast problem. See your doctor if you have:

- a lump or swelling in the armpit
- changes in breast size or shape
- dimpling or puckering of the skin - sometimes called *orange peel skin*
- redness, swelling and increased warmth in the affected breast
- inverted nipple - nipple turns inwards
- crusting or scaling on the nipple



## Cervical cancer

Cervical cancer starts in the cells of the cervix. It usually grows very slowly. Before cervical cancer develops, the cells of the cervix start to change and become abnormal. These abnormal cells are precancerous, meaning they are not cancer. Precancerous changes to the cervix are called *cervical dysplasia*.

Cervical dysplasia and cervical cancer in its early stages often do not cause any symptoms. Having screening tests regularly can help find dysplasia or cervical cancer before symptoms develop. Both can usually be treated successfully when diagnosed early.

You are at higher risk of developing cervical cancer if you became sexually active at a young age or have had multiple sexual partners. These factors increase your risk of being exposed to HPV (the human papillomavirus). HPV is a group of viruses that can be passed easily from person to person through sexual contact. HPV infections are common and usually go away without treatment, because the immune system gets rid of the virus. Only certain types of HPV can cause changes to cells in the cervix that may lead to cervical cancer.

## ***What you can do***

Once you become sexually active, have a Pap test every 1 to 3 years (this timing often depends on your previous test results). A Pap test is a laboratory examination of cells taken from the cervix to detect changes. It can detect changes early before cancer develops.

Continue to have a Pap test even if you have stopped having sex.

Talk to your doctor about whether to continue having a Pap test if you have had a hysterectomy (removal of the uterus, cervix and sometimes the ovaries).

When you have a Pap test, you might also have a pelvic exam. This is a physical examination of the organs within the pelvis through the vagina. The doctor puts a gloved finger into the vagina to check the cervix and pelvic organs for anything that seems unusual. It doesn't check for cervical cancer, but may uncover other problems.

Use a condom during sex to help avoid an HPV infection.

Consider the HPV vaccine if you are between 9 and 26 years of age. It protects against some of the HPV infections that cause more than 70% of cervical cancer cases and most types of genital warts. The vaccine should be used along with cervical cancer screening, not instead of screening.

## ***What to watch for***

These signs and symptoms may be caused by cervical cancer or by other health problems. See your doctor if you have:

- abnormal bleeding or bloodstained discharge from the vagina in between periods
- unusually long or heavy periods
- bleeding after sexual intercourse
- pain during sexual intercourse
- watery discharge from the vagina
- increased amount of discharge from the vagina
- bleeding from the vagina after menopause



## Colorectal cancer

Most colorectal cancers start in the cells that line the inside of the colon and the rectum. It is the third most common cancer in Canada for both men and women. Colorectal cancer often grows slowly and in a predictable way. It may not cause any symptoms in its early stages because the lower abdomen (below the stomach area) has lots of room for a tumour to grow and expand. Screening tests help find colorectal cancer before symptoms develop. It can usually be treated successfully when diagnosed early.

### *What you can do*

If you are 50 or older, have a fecal occult blood test (FOBT) at least every 2 years. This test checks your stool for blood that can be seen only with a microscope. Having blood in the stool doesn't always mean that you have cancer. It could have other causes – for example, polyps (non-cancerous tissue growth), ulcers or even hemorrhoids.

If the FOBT shows traces of blood in the stool, follow-up tests may include a:

- **Colonoscopy:** a test that lets the doctor look at the lining of the entire colon using a thin, flexible tube with a light and camera at the end.
- **Sigmoidoscopy:** a test that lets the doctor look at the lining of the rectum and lower part of the colon using a thin, flexible tube with a light and camera at the end.

- **Double-contrast barium enema:** an x-ray of the colon and rectum that uses a special dye (called barium) that helps the doctor see the lining of the colon more clearly.

Some women have a higher than average risk for colorectal cancer. Talk to your doctor about when and how often you should have the tests if you have:

- a parent, brother, sister or child with colorectal cancer (especially if the relative was diagnosed before the age of 45)
- a personal history of colorectal cancer
- already been diagnosed with inflammatory bowel disease or polyps
- an inherited condition such as familial adenomatous polyposis (FAP) or hereditary non-polyposis colon cancer (HNCC)

### *What to watch for*

These signs and symptoms may be caused by colorectal cancer or by other health problems. See your doctor if you have:

- general discomfort in the abdomen (bloating, fullness, cramps)
- a change in bowel habits, such as diarrhea or constipation, for no apparent reason
- blood in the stool (either bright red or very dark)
- stools that are narrower than usual
- an urgent need to have a bowel movement
- a feeling that the bowel hasn't completely emptied

- nausea or vomiting
- fatigue (feeling very tired)
- weight loss

## Skin cancer

The different types of skin cancer (basal cell, squamous cell and melanoma) begin in different kinds of cells in the skin. Basal cell and squamous cell skin cancers are very common in Canada, but both types can usually be treated easily and successfully.

### *What you can do*

The best way to prevent skin cancer is to protect yourself from the sun. Here are a few tips on how to stay safe in the sun:

- Protect yourself and your family particularly between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m. when the sun's rays are at their strongest, or any time of the day when the UV Index is 3 or higher. Stay in the shade – under trees, an awning or an umbrella – and try to plan outdoor activities before 11 a.m. or after 4 p.m.
- Cover your arms, legs and head. Choose clothing that is loose-fitting, tightly woven and lightweight. Don't forget your hat to protect your head, face, ears and neck.
- Use a sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of 15 or higher. Don't forget to apply sunscreen on cloudy days and during the winter.

- Wear sunglasses to help prevent damage to your eyes. Choose glasses with even shading, medium to dark lenses, and UVA and UVB protection.
- Avoid using indoor tanning equipment. Just like the sun, tanning lights and sun lamps give off ultraviolet rays that can cause sunburn, damage skin and increase the risk of skin cancer.
- Check your skin regularly. Get to know the skin you're in and report any changes to your doctor.

### *What to watch for*

These signs and symptoms may be caused by skin cancer or by other skin problems. See your doctor if you have:

- changes in the shape, colour or size of birthmarks or moles
- sores that don't heal
- patches of skin that bleed, itch or become red and bumpy



## Preventing cancer

### *Live well. Make healthy choices.*

- Be a non-smoker and avoid second-hand smoke.
- Keep a healthy body weight. Be active and eat well.
- Know the risks of alcohol. The less you drink, the more you reduce your risk.
- Protect your skin. Be safe in the sun and don't use tanning beds.
- Get enough vitamin D from the sun, supplements and your diet.

### *Be aware. Look after yourself.*

- Know your body and watch for signs of cancer.
- Report any changes in your health to your doctor.
- Get screened and help find cancer early.
- Check your family's cancer history.
- Understand how hormones and infections affect your cancer risk.
- Get rid of harmful substances at work and at home.

### *Get involved. Help reduce risks for everyone.*

- Raise awareness about cancer prevention in your community.
- Reduce cancer risks for the next generation.
- Fight for public policy to make healthy living easier for everyone.
- Find out how you can help the Society fight for change right now.

## Find out more

If you want to know more about early detection and screening:

- 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**.
- Contact your local Canadian Cancer Society office.







## What we do

The Canadian Cancer Society fights cancer by:

- doing everything we can to prevent cancer
- funding research to outsmart cancer
- empowering, informing and supporting Canadians living with cancer
- advocating for public policies to improve the health of Canadians
- rallying Canadians to get involved in the fight against cancer

Contact us for up-to-date information about cancer, our services or to make a donation.



Canadian Cancer Society  
Société canadienne du cancer

Let's Make Cancer History  
1 888 939-3333 | [www.cancer.ca](http://www.cancer.ca)

This is general information developed by the Canadian Cancer Society. It is not intended to replace the advice of a qualified healthcare provider.

The material in this publication may be copied or reproduced without permission; however, the following citation must be used: *Early Detection and Screening: Facts for women*. Canadian Cancer Society 2007.