

# Breast cancer

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## What is it?

Breast cancer represents a group of about eight separate types of malignant tumors that are found in the breast. Over 70% of all breast cancers are *ductal carcinomas* which start out in the cells that line the milk ducts. The remaining 30% of breast cancers represent a variety of other tumors which vary in their appearance and course.

## What causes it?

It's still not clear what causes breast cancer. Researchers are investigating the role of viruses and diet in the development of the disease. As of yet, current research has not found any consistent relationship between estrogen use and risk of breast cancer. We do know that there are some risk factors which place certain women at high risk of developing breast cancer.

### Risk Factors

- Age over 50
- Close family history of breast cancer
- First child after age 30
- Never having children
- Early *menarche* (starting periods before 12)
- Late *menopause* (stopping periods after 55)
- Obesity - more than 10% overweight

Do not place too much faith in being "safe" if you have none of these risk factors - what puts you at greatest risk for breast cancer is that you are a woman. The majority of women who are diagnosed with breast cancer do not fall into any special "high risk" category.

## Who gets it?

Breast cancer is the leading cause of death between the ages of 35 - 54. Your lifetime chance of developing breast cancer is 1 in 8 if you live to age 90. Caucasians over age 45 are more likely than blacks to

have breast cancer and death rates are higher in urban areas. About 115,000 new cases of breast cancer are diagnosed each year.

## What are the symptoms?

Findings in breast cancer differ somewhat from type to type, but generally they present as lumps in the breast which are hard to the touch and may or may not be growing in size. In advanced stages they may cause visible dimpling of the skin or retraction and inversion of the nipple. Often an additional lump is found in the armpit representing a *lymph node* which drains from the breast. The lumps either in the breast or in the armpit may or may not be painful. Occasionally there may be discharge from your nipples which can vary in color, but often is bloody.

The main thing to look for is any change in your breast. It's normal for your breasts to be slightly different in size. A firm ridge in the lower curve of your breast is also normal. Any lumps which are new should be examined by your family physician.

## How do you prevent it?

Breast cancer is hard to prevent. The best protection against breast cancer is to detect it at the earliest stage and to treat it promptly.

The most effective way to find breast lumps that may be cancer is to do three things:

1. Have regular mammograms as recommended
2. Have your doctor check your breasts regularly
3. Check your breasts yourself every month

Doing all three gives you the best chance of finding cancer as early as possible. Finding breast cancer early makes treatment much easier and more effective. More than 90 out of 100 women whose breast cancer is found early will be cured.

**Mammography** - A mammogram is the most effective way to find breast cancer early, up to two years before the lump is even large enough to feel. A mammogram is a special kind of X-ray of your breast.

Mammograms are safe because the amount of radiation used in the X-ray is very small.

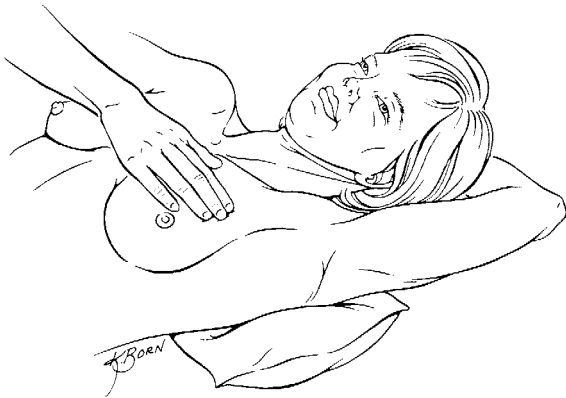
The US Preventive Services Task Force is now recommending routine screening mammography every 1-2 years for women age 40 and older. If you have a mother or sister with breast cancer, you may want to start mammography earlier than age 40. After age 75, screening benefit becomes more uncertain.

**Physician examination** - It is important that an examination by a physician be performed at least every 3 years from age 20 - 40, and every year thereafter until age 75. Your family doctor is trained to distinguish what may be a problem tumor from a normal lump. This is commonly done at the same time as your Pap smear. You should talk with your doctor when it's time for your breasts to be checked.

**Self-examination** - You should examine your breasts every month beginning about age 20. You may need a number of years of regular checking to get used to how your breasts normally feel.

Check your breasts a few days after your period. If you don't have periods or they are irregular, check your breasts at the same time every month.

Start by standing in front of a mirror. Look at your breasts with your arms at your side, with your arms raised behind your head, and with your arms on your hips with your chest muscles flexed.



Next lie down with a pillow under your left shoulder. Put your left hand behind your head and feel your left breast with the pads of your three middle fingers on your right hand. Start at the outer edge and work around your breast in circles, getting closer to your nipple with each circle. After you finish checking your breast, squeeze your nipple gently and look for discharge (fluid coming out the nipple). Be sure to examine the area out to your armpit. Cancer can spread to lymph node tissue in this area without having a lump in the breast.

Do the same thing in reverse to your right breast. You may want to check your breasts in the same way while standing in the shower. Breasts are usually symmetrical. A lump in one section of the breast should have a similar lump on the opposite breast (mirror image).

Again, the main thing to emphasize with breast self-examination is that you are looking for a lump that stands out as different from the rest or as new when compared to a previous exam.

## Can it be treated?

Of course it's natural to be concerned if a lump has been found in your breast. But 80% of all breast lumps are *benign*, which means no cancer is present. If this is the case, treatment may be as simple as observation and rechecking later, or perhaps a small *needle aspiration* which may remove some fluid and reduce the size of the lump.

However, if in fact you have been diagnosed with breast cancer there are several treatment options. No single treatment is right for all breast cancer patients. Treatment varies according to age, overall health, patient and physician preference, kind and extent of cancer, and other considerations.

- **Lumpectomy and Radiation** is a procedure where only the tumor and some surrounding tissue are removed. After surgery, radiation therapy to the specific area is generally required.

- **Modified radical mastectomy** involves the removal of the breast and lymph nodes in the armpit. Breast reconstruction can often be done immediately or soon after this type of surgery.

- **Hormonal therapy** involves using drugs to prevent the growth of hormone-dependent cancers.

- **Chemotherapy treatment** destroys tumors directly with anti-cancer drugs.

## In summary

- All women are at risk for breast cancer.
- Mammography is the most effective way to find breast cancer and should be done regularly.
- Physician examination should be done yearly, from age 40 until age 75.
- Self-examination should be done monthly.
- Most breast lumps are benign.
- For more information contact the National Cancer Institute at (800) 4-CANCER or [cis.nci.gov](http://cis.nci.gov) or the American Cancer Society at (800) 227-2345 or [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org).