

Breast Cancer

HOW COMMON IS BREAST CANCER?

One in eight women will develop breast cancer in their lifetime. It is the second most common cancer in women—skin cancer is the most common. Death rates are very low, with a 42 percent decrease in death rates between 1989 and 1921. The improved survival rates are due to screening, awareness (education), and new and effective treatments available.

WHAT ARE THE RISK FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH BREAST CANCER?

The following women have an increased risk:

- Women whose mother or sisters have had breast cancer
- Women who have never had children
- Women who have never breastfed
- Over 50 years old
- Use of the birth control pill
- Use of combined hormone replacement therapy for more than 4 years
- Overweight after menopause
- Alcohol use
- Not physically active

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF BREAST CANCER?

- Breast lump or thickening
- Bleeding or discharge from the nipple
- Change in the shape of the breast
- Dimpling or puckering of the skin
- Retraction or scaliness of the nipple
- Inflamed reddish appearance

HOW CAN I TELL IF I HAVE A NEW LUMP WHEN MY BREASTS ARE USUALLY LUMPY?

Many women have irregular or lumpy breasts, sometimes referred to as fibrocystic breast disease or benign breast changes. Some or many small cysts may develop in the breast. These may be tender to touch and may be more tender before menstrual periods. If you discover these for the first time, consult a health care provider to be sure it is a benign condition. Usually there is no treatment for this, but women are advised to lessen or eliminate caffeine intake because caffeine aggravates the condition.

HOW IS BREAST CANCER DIAGNOSED?

When a lump is detected, either by manual examination or mammogram, a biopsy is done to determine if it is malignant. The good news is that 80 percent of all suspicious areas found, and biopsies performed, reveal a benign-noncancerous change. The physician may order an ultrasound to determine if the lump is fluid or solid and may opt to do a surgical excision of the entire lump instead of a needle biopsy. The main goal is to be able to send a sample of the tissue for testing to determine if there are cancer cells present.

HOW CAN I DETECT CANCER EARLY AND IMPROVE THE PROBABILITY OF BEING CURED?

If you are in the high-risk group (See cancer.org to assess this) then:

- Do monthly self-breast exams, about a week after menstrual periods. If in menopause, choose a particular day of each month so you will remember to do them. Consult with your physician if you find anything suspicious or questionable.
- Have a yearly exam of the breast by a health care provider. The American Cancer Society recommends this.
- Have regular mammograms starting at age 30 if you are in the high-risk category.

If you have an average risk for developing breast cancer the recommendations are to have a mammogram every one to two years beginning age 40–45. Recommendation differs by source of information and risk category. If a suspicious lump has been detected, then in some cases an MRI may be done to prevent an incorrect diagnosis.

Most cases of breast cancer are found by women themselves when they are changing or bathing. When found in an early stage it is highly curable and the chances of survival are excellent.

RESOURCES

American Cancer Society. <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/types/breast-cancer.html>

Mayo Clinic. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/breast-cancer/symptoms-causes/syc-20352470>

Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer website. <https://www.komen.org/breast-cancer/>