

What affects your risk of getting breast cancer?

The causes of breast cancer are not fully known. However, health and medical researchers have identified a number of factors that increase a woman's chances of getting breast cancer. These are called risk factors. Risk factors are not necessarily causes of breast cancer, but are associated with an increased chance of getting breast cancer. Importantly, some women have many risk factors but never get breast cancer, and some women have few or no risk factors but do get the disease. Being a woman is the number one risk factor for breast cancer. For this reason, it is important to have routine mammograms, get regular clinical breast exams and perform monthly breast self-exams (BSE) in order to detect any problems early. See your health care provider to discuss your personal risk and your breast health needs.

There are some risk factors you can control, and others you cannot. Remember, even if you do not have any of these risk factors, you can still develop breast cancer.

Factors that may increase your risk of breast cancer

- getting older — the older you get, the greater your risk of breast cancer
- having an inherited mutation in the BRCA1 or BRCA2 breast cancer genes
- having a previous biopsy showing hyperplasia or carcinoma in situ
- a family history of breast cancer
- having high breast density on a mammogram
- being exposed to large amounts of radiation, such as having very frequent spine X-rays during scoliosis treatment or treatment for Hodgkin's disease at a young age
- a personal history of breast or ovarian cancer
- starting menopause after age 55
- never having children
- having your first child after age 35
- high bone density
- being overweight after menopause or gaining weight as an adult
- having more than one drink of alcohol per day
- currently or recently using combined estrogen and progesterone hormone replacement therapy (HRT)
- being younger than 12 at the time of your first period
- current or recent use of birth control pills

Age: a major factor

A woman's chance of getting breast cancer increases with age. Your chance by your current age is:

| | |
|--------|------------|
| age 20 | 1 in 1,985 |
| age 30 | 1 in 229 |
| age 40 | 1 in 68 |
| age 50 | 1 in 37 |
| age 60 | 1 in 26 |
| age 70 | 1 in 24 |
| ever | 1 in 8 |

Source: American Cancer Society Surveillance Research, 2005.

Get the facts on breast cancer

Because the causes and cure of breast cancer are not yet fully known, many people have misconceptions about the disease. Here is what we know for sure:

Myth Fact

I'm only 35. Breast cancer happens only in older women.

While the risk of breast cancer increases with age, all women are at risk for getting breast cancer.

Women with a family history of breast cancer are the ones who typically get breast cancer.

Actually, most women who get breast cancer have no family history of the disease. However, a woman whose mother, sister or daughter had breast cancer has an increased risk.

If I don't have a mutated BRCA1 or BRCA2 gene, I won't get breast cancer.

Just because you do not have a mutated BRCA1 or BRCA2 gene, you can still get breast cancer. About 90 to 95 percent of women who get breast cancer actually do not have an inherited form of breast cancer, or a mutated BRCA1 or BRCA2 gene.¹

Women with more than one risk factor are the ones who typically get breast cancer.

A majority of women diagnosed with breast cancer have no known risk factors outside of their gender. All women are at risk.

You can prevent breast cancer.

Because the cause of breast cancer is not yet fully known, there is no way to absolutely prevent it, although the antiestrogen drug tamoxifen can help reduce the risk. If you develop breast cancer, early detection and treatment are the keys to surviving.

If I had a mammogram every year, I would be exposed to too much radiation, and that would cause cancer.

The small level of radiation from mammograms is believed to be safe, with the benefits outweighing the risks.²

Breastfeeding can increase my risk of breast cancer.

Breastfeeding may decrease a woman's risk of getting premenopausal breast cancer.

For more information about risk factors go to www.komen.org/riskmatrix

Related fact sheets in this series:

- Genetics & Breast Cancer
- How Hormones Affect Breast Cancer
- Breast Cancer Detection

1 American Cancer Society, Breast Cancer Facts & Figures 2005-2006.

2 American College of Radiology,
www.radiologyinfo.org/content/mammogram.htm/.