



Reducing Your Risk of

Breast Cancer

“How can I reduce my risk of breast cancer?”

After skin cancer, breast cancer is the most common cancer among women. While no one can predict exactly who will develop breast cancer, there are ways to help protect yourself. This pamphlet has specific, simple steps to help you lower your breast cancer risk and detect early signs of the disease.

“Does early detection really make a difference?”

Yes. The sooner breast cancer is found, the more successfully it is treated. If a cancer is detected while it is small and well-localized in the breast tissue, the five-year survival rate is over 95 percent. But survival rates drop dramatically when the cancer is large and has spread within the breast or to other parts of the body.

“If breast cancer runs in my family, will I get it too?”

Family history is one factor that may increase your risk of breast cancer, but it does not guarantee that you will one day have the disease. In fact, researchers estimate that only about 5-10 percent of breast cancers can be attributed primarily to inherited genetic factors.

“What are the risk factors for breast cancer?”

Any woman can develop breast cancer, but the following known factors put you at higher risk: being age 50 or over, having an inherited gene mutation, like BRCA1 or BRCA2 genes, or a family or personal history of breast cancer. Being overweight also raises risk.

Other minor factors include: being of white race, early onset of menses (before age 12), late onset of menopause (after age 55), late age of first childbirth (after age 30) or no pregnancies, never breastfeeding a child, use of oral contraceptives, use of estrogen replacement therapy for more than five years and history of endometrial, ovarian or colon cancer.

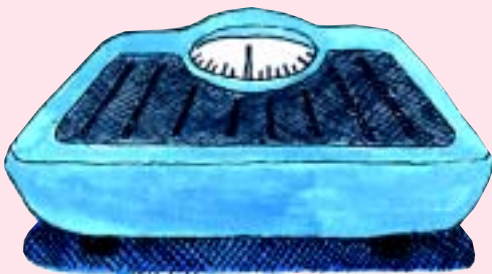
Some of these factors cannot be controlled. Luckily, you can make many lifestyle choices, such as losing weight, to reduce your breast cancer risk.

Diet and Lifestyle... Important Risk Factors You Can Control

The experts who wrote AICR's 1997 landmark report, *Food, Nutrition and the Prevention of Cancer*, concluded that a mostly plant-based diet, avoidance of alcohol, maintenance of a healthy weight and regular physical activity could reduce the incidence of breast cancer by 33 to 50 percent.

By modifying your diet and exercise habits, you can significantly reduce your risk of developing breast cancer.

- **Get moving every day.** Physical activity can help reduce breast cancer risk. Walk, swim, garden, dance or ride your bike. Use the stairs. Get involved in activities that you enjoy.
- **Maintain a healthy weight.** The risk of post-menopausal breast cancer increases with obesity. Make sure your portion sizes match your calorie needs. Eating more vegetables and fruits can help you cut down on higher-calorie and high-fat foods on your plate.
- **Eat a mostly plant-based diet** with a large variety of vegetables, fruits, whole grains and beans. Make a point to eat at least five servings of vegetables and fruits each day.
- **If you drink alcohol, use moderation.** Women should have no more than one drink a day. And if you don't drink, don't start.



Early Detection Saves Lives!

1. Breast Self-Exam (BSE)

Because women often find breast cancers themselves, make a monthly BSE your first line of defense. This habit could save your life. Ask a health professional to show you how.

- If you're 20 or over, conduct a self-exam the week following your menstrual period.
- If you're no longer menstruating, examine yourself on the same day every month.

If you experience any changes in your breasts that are unusual for you, consult your doctor right away.

2. Clinical Breast Exam (CBE)

During a CBE, a trained medical or health professional will inspect and feel the entire breast/chest area and discuss BSE techniques.

- Between ages 20 and 39, request a CBE once every three years.
- Beginning at age 40, have a CBE every year.

Your doctor may recommend more frequent exams, depending on your medical history.

3. Mammogram

Despite recent controversy about its usefulness, mammography is currently the most effective tool for detecting breast cancer early. A mammogram can discover tumors long before they can be felt in a physical examination. Such early detection has been shown to save lives. Since mammography is not a perfect test, it is still important to conduct a monthly BSE and see your physician for a regular CBE as well, even if a mammogram shows no cancer.

- Beginning at age 40, have a mammogram every 1 to 2 years.

Depending on your medical history, your doctor may have different recommendations about when to have your first mammogram and how often to have additional tests.



Frequently Asked Questions

Does the amount of fat in my diet matter?

Although dietary fat was once considered a major factor in breast cancer risk, recent research has shifted focus to emphasize the cancer-protective effect of vegetables and fruits. For better general health, you should cut down on fat, especially saturated fat found in animal foods. But some fat is needed in your diet. Moderate amounts of olive and canola oils, nuts and fatty fish are good choices.

Will soy protect me from breast cancer? Or is it harmful?

Soy might offer some protection against breast cancer and other diseases. For premenopausal women, current research supports moderate amounts of soy as a part of a mostly plant-based diet. Women who are post-menopausal, at high risk for breast cancer, take tamoxifen or have been diagnosed with estrogen receptor-positive (ER+) breast cancer may want to limit themselves to a few servings per week. Soy protein and isoflavone supplements have not been adequately researched to recommend at this time.

Be Alert to Possible Symptoms

- Lump or thickening of the breast
- Breast pain
- Dimpling or puckering of the skin
- Change in skin color or texture
- Change in breast shape
- Swelling, redness or heat in the breast
- Discharge from the nipple
- Retraction of the nipple
- Scaly skin on or around the nipple

Frequently Asked Questions

Should I eat flaxseed?

More flaxseed studies are needed to make a specific recommendation. For now, a small amount of ground flaxseed (1 tablespoon) per day may provide some health benefits and is most likely safe. Until more information is available, women undergoing breast cancer treatment, children, young adults and women who are pregnant, breast feeding or trying to conceive should be cautious about using flax.

What about the studies that deny the benefits of eating fruits and vegetables?

When making personal health decisions, it is important to look at a large number of research results – not just one or two – because the many variables among scientific studies lead to different conclusions. One individual study may gain media attention because it contradicts the larger body of evidence. Hundreds of studies over the last decades, however, support a long-term diet high in vegetables and fruits for reducing cancer risk.

AICR Diet and Health Guidelines for Cancer Prevention

1. Choose a diet rich in a variety of plant-based foods.
2. Eat plenty of vegetables and fruits.
3. Maintain a healthy weight and be physically active.
4. Drink alcohol only in moderation, if at all.
5. Select foods low in fat and salt.
6. Prepare and store food safely.

And always remember...

Do not use tobacco in any form.

For More Information

The American Institute for Cancer Research supports research and provides education in the area of diet, nutrition and cancer. It is only through your donations, or by leaving a bequest or legacy, that AICR is able to carry out its vital work. To become an active supporter of our work or to order free publications, please call or write:

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