

What You Should Know About Breast Cancer

When breast cancer is found early, the 5-year survival rate is 96%. A mammography (or an X-ray of the breasts), clinical examination, and breast self-examination (BSE) offer women the best defense against the disease and help to ensure good breast health. Even when a lump is detected, eight out of 10 breast lumps turn out to be benign, or noncancerous. There are over 2 million breast cancer survivors alive in America today.

Who Is at Risk?

While the exact cause of breast cancer is unknown, there are some factors that may increase the occurrence of the disease. As a woman grows older, her risk increases. If a woman has breast cancer in her family history, or if she herself has had breast cancer before, then she is also more susceptible. Early menstruation (before age 12 years) and late menopause (after age 55 years) can be risk factors, as well as late pregnancies or no pregnancies at all. And while white women are more likely to develop breast cancer, the mortality rate in black women is higher.

What Are the Symptoms of Breast Cancer?

- A single, firm, painless lump
- Swelling and unusual appearance of the skin on the breast or underarm
- The nipple becomes inverted, develops a rash, changes in texture, or has an unusual discharge
- A depression on the surface of the breast.

How Is Breast Cancer Detected?

Breast cancer can be detected through a number of means, one being mammography. The American Cancer Society recommends obtaining a first mammogram by age 40 years. After that, a mammogram should be scheduled every 1 to 2 years for women aged 40 to 49 years. For women aged 50 years and older, a mammogram is recommended every year. While a mammogram may be uncomfortable, it only takes between 10 and 15 minutes to complete and can detect abnormalities in a woman's breast before they are discovered in a BSE or clinical exam. They also give the radiologist a way to compare images and look for minor changes.

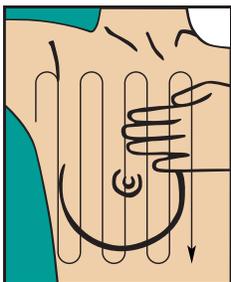
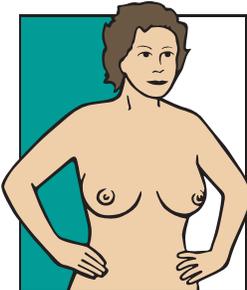
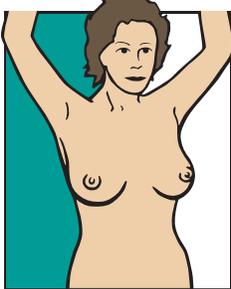
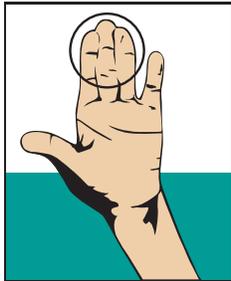
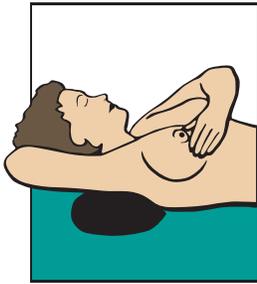
During a mammogram, the breast is positioned between two rigid plates to reduce the radiation dose and eliminate motion so the radiologist will attain a clear image. Although this compression may be a bit uncomfortable, it only lasts for a few seconds and is necessary to produce a good mammogram. On the day of your exam, you should not use deodorant, as some of the ingredients used in deodorant can be misinterpreted in your images. Also, remember to wear a two-piece outfit, since you will need to undress from the waist up.

A mammogram should be scheduled shortly after the end of your period. If you do not hear from your health care provider within 10 days of your mammogram, call to check the status of your exam.

Another form of detection is the BSE. By age 20 years, women should perform BSEs on a regular basis. They should be done once a month at about the same time every month,

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Breast Cancer



the best time being right after your monthly period. There are three parts to a complete BSE:

- In a lying position, place a pillow under your right shoulder and place your right arm behind your head. Keep the fingers of your left hand flat and press your right breast gently in small circular motions, moving vertically or in a circular pattern covering the entire breast. Gently squeeze your nipple, checking for discharge and lumps. Repeat these steps for the left breast.
- Stand in front of a mirror and inspect your breasts with your arms at your sides. Next, raise your arms overhead. Look for any changes in the contour of each breast—swelling, dimpling of the skin, or changes in the nipple. Then rest your palms on your hips and press firmly to flex your chest muscles. (Your left and right breast will not match exactly.)
- While you are in the shower, soap your breasts and, keeping your fingers flat, move gently over every part of the breast. Use your right hand to examine your left breast and your left hand for your right breast. Check for any lumps, hard knots, or thickening. Carefully observe any changes in your breasts.

Is There a Way I Can Reduce My Risk of Breast Cancer?

Every woman is at risk for breast cancer. According to the National Cancer Institute, one in eight American women will develop breast cancer in her lifetime. However, there are certain lifestyle changes you can make that will help reduce your risk of developing breast can-

Resources

- **American Cancer Society**
1-800-ACS-2345 (<http://www.cancer.org>)
- **The Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation**
1-800-462-9273 (<http://www.komen.org>)
- **Y-me National Breast Cancer Organization**
1-800-221-2141 (<http://www.y-me.org>)

cer. Women who breast-feed their children reduce their risk of breast cancer. A breast cancer risk reduction study shows that there is a direct association between increased fat intake, alcohol intake, and decreased exercise and an increase in the incidence of breast cancer. Therefore, it is important to maintain a healthy weight and also limit your alcohol intake to no more than one drink a day. Regular exercise will help to keep your weight controlled as well as reduce your risk of breast cancer.

Early detection of breast cancer improves a woman's chance for optimum treatment and recovery. Proper screening is a critical step in detection. A combination of regular BSEs and mammograms along with a low-fat diet, exercise, and lifestyle changes can greatly reduce your risk of developing breast cancer. Be aware of new recommendations and studies, as new discoveries in the field of breast cancer are being made every day. Your best defense is to have a good understanding of your risk and to make sure to take the necessary steps to maintain your good health.

This Patient Handout was prepared by Elisheba Haqq-Stevens, RN, using materials from Beattie MS. Breast Cancer Risk Reduction. The Female Patient. 2005;30(10):16-20, [breastcancer.org](http://www.breastcancer.org) (<http://www.breastcancer.org>), and the American Cancer Society Web site (<http://www.cancer.org>).

Illustrations: Courtesy of The Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation.

