

Breast Cancer

Partnership Action Group of the W.Va. Breast and Cervical Cancer Coalition
in conjunction with the WVU Mary Babb Randolph Cancer Center and
WVDHHR, Bureau for Public Health

What is breast cancer?

Breast cancer is the most common type of cancer among women in the United States. Breast cancer is a disease in which breast cells become abnormal and divide without control or order.

What puts me at risk for breast cancer?

Simply being a woman and getting older put you at risk for developing breast cancer. The risk of breast cancer increases as a woman gets older. Most breast cancers occur in women over the age of 50; the risk is especially high for women over 60. This disease is uncommon in women under the age of 35. Risk also is greater for women who have a family history of breast cancer. The risk of getting breast cancer increases for a woman whose mother, sister, or daughter has had the disease. The woman's risk increases more if her relative's cancer developed before menopause or if it affected both breasts. About 5 percent of women with breast cancer have a hereditary form of this disease. These women usually develop breast cancer at a younger age (before menopause), and they have multiple family members with the disease.

Other risk factors for breast cancer include starting to menstruate at an early age (before 12) or having a late menopause (after 55). The risk is also greater in women who had their first child after the age of 30 and those who never had children. These factors are all related to a woman's natural hormones. At this time, no one knows whether the risk of breast cancer is affected by taking medicines that contain hormones (for birth control, to treat infertility, or as estrogen replacement therapy to control symptoms of menopause). Scientists hope to find the answer to this important question by studying a large number of women taking part in hormone-related research.

Older women who are overweight seem to have a greater risk of breast cancer. Although the possible link between diet and breast cancer is still under study, some scientists believe that choosing a low-fat diet, eating well-balanced meals with plenty of fruits and vegetables, and maintaining ideal weight may lower a

woman's risk. Also, recent studies suggest that regular exercise may decrease the risk of breast cancer in younger women.

It is important to keep in mind that these risk factors do not necessarily cause cancer; they are merely associations. Having one or more of these factors does not mean that you are certain or even likely to develop breast cancer. Even among women with a strong family history—both a mother and a sister or two sisters, one of whom developed breast cancer in both breasts or before menopause—three-fourths will not develop breast cancer.

Not having any of the known risk factors, on the other hand, does not mean that you are "safe." The majority of women who develop breast cancer do not have a family history of breast cancer and do not fall into any other special high-risk category.

What are the symptoms of breast cancer?

These are the changes women should watch for:

1. a lump or thickening in or near the breast or underarm area;
2. a change in the size or shape of the breasts;
3. a discharge from the nipple; or
4. a change in the color, look, or feel of the skin of the breast.

How can I find breast cancer early?

Finding breast cancer early is important. The earlier cancer is found, the greater the chance of treating it successfully. Women who find breast cancer early have more choices for treatment. Finding breast cancer early means you could save your breast and your life!!

There are three things you can do to find the changes that may be symptoms of breast cancer:

1. Do a monthly breast self-exam.
2. Have a doctor or nurse check your breasts every year.
3. Get a mammogram. All women age 50 and older need to get a mammogram every year.

How will I pay for a mammogram?

If you have health insurance, check to see if it will cover the complete cost of a mammogram. If you have insurance but have not met your deductible, your insurance may not cover the cost of a mammogram. Remember, **beginning in 1998, Medicare** will pay for a mammogram every year. If you do not have insurance or your insurance does not cover a mammogram, and you meet our income guidelines, you can get help to pay for a mammogram:

1. Call your **local health department** and ask about the **Breast and Cervical Cancer Screening Program (BCCSP)**. This program offers free and low-cost clinical breast exams, mammograms, pelvic exams, and Pap tests to women who qualify.
2. Call the **Cancer Information Service at 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237)** or the **American Cancer Society at 1-800-227-2345**, to find out about free or low-cost mammography programs in your area.

Are there ways to reduce my risk?

1. A Healthy Diet May Lower Risk

Much research in the last few years has shown that the way people eat has a lot to do with how healthy they are—and how healthy they stay. This research also has shown that eating a healthful diet, that's low in fat, high in fiber, and contains plenty of fruits and vegetables, may help to lower cancer risk. National Cancer Institute Dietary Guidelines are:

- Reduce fat intake to 30 percent of calories or less.
- Increase fiber to 20-30 grams/day with an upper limit of 35 grams.
- Include a variety of fruits and vegetables in the daily diet.
- Avoid obesity.
- Consume alcoholic beverages in moderation, if at all.
- Minimize consumption of salt-cured, salt-pickled, and smoked foods.

For more information on diet and cancer, call the Cancer Information Service at **1-800-4-CANCER**.

2. Exercise May Lower Risk

Exercise isn't just for athletes. It's for you. It's for everyone. It's more than sports and building muscles. In fact, you don't need special equipment, a health club, or a class. All you need is the will to do it. Not in the mood? Can't seem to get started? Make exercise a regular part of your day. Walking is a perfect example of exercise that most people can do. Walking is fun and easy, and—best of all—it gets the job done. Brisk walking can give your heart a workout. Good shoes are

the only thing you need. Walking can be pleasant alone, with a partner, or while listening to a radio. When going to the mall, park at the far end and walk to where you need to go. Take the stairs instead of the escalator or elevator. Add walking to your daily activities. Lower your risk for breast cancer and other diseases. **Take a walk for better health!**

Take the Challenge!

Take responsibility for your own health. Take one or more of these challenges:

1. Do a monthly breast self-exam. Check your breasts once a month. Always check your breasts at the same time each month—either two or three days after your period ends. Or if you don't have periods, pick a date, such as the first day of the month.

2. Be a Special Friend! Participate in our Special Friend project, sponsored by the W.Va. Breast and Cervical Cancer Coalition. This three-part program encourages women age 50 and over to practice breast self-exam, have a yearly breast examination by a physician, and have a routine screening mammogram. You will receive a shower card, monthly reminder stickers, and a participation card. Place a sticker on your calendar on the same day of every month. Put the shower card in your bathroom. Call your buddy on the same day of every month to remind her to do her breast self-exam, get a yearly clinical breast exam, and have a screening mammogram. Mail in your participation card.

3. Woman to Woman. The Woman to Woman project, sponsored by the BCCSP, is simple. Agree to talk with five to ten women you know. Get a packet of information on finding breast cancer early for each woman you will contact. Contact each woman and give her a packet of information. Instruct and encourage each woman to practice monthly breast self-examination, have a clinical breast exam, and have a yearly mammogram. Hand in your completed contact form to receive a gift.

Double your challenge! Get extra information packets. Give each woman you contact **two** packets. Ask her to share her second packet with a friend.

Take the challenge . . . You're worth it!

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