

Breast Cancer

Symptoms and Treatments




Advent Health



We're here to help you understand breast cancer.

From the warning signs and why it's so common, to how it's diagnosed and treated, we will help you find the information and resources you need.

Breast cancer is the second most common type of cancer affecting U.S. women, with about 1 in 8 being diagnosed in her lifetime. These numbers are expected to rise, but it's important to know that many women are surviving breast cancer thanks to early detection and state-of-the-art therapies.

In this guide, we will review the warning signs, risks, diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer.



What is breast cancer?

Breast cancer is defined by cancerous cells that originate in the breast tissue of both women and, more rarely, men.

Like all cancer, breast cancer is caused by the rapid division of abnormal cells which spread to surrounding tissues. Our bodies are made up of trillions of healthy cells that grow and divide to create healthy new cells that replace old or damaged cells. When our immune systems are unable to replace and remove damaged cells, those cells can create new, malfunctioning cells that continue to divide uncontrollably. This can result in tissue growth called tumors.

Cancerous tumors are dangerous because the cancer cells can spread, or metastasize, to nearby tissues. When these cells break off and travel through our blood or lymph systems, new tumors can form in other parts of our bodies.



What causes breast cancer?

Breast cancer is a genetic disease that starts with the genes that control the way breast cells function. When these genes change, they also change the way breast cells grow and divide.

Some genetic changes are inherited. If you have a family history of breast cancer, you may have a mutation in either of the BRCA1 or BRCA2 genes. When these genes mutate, they are less able to suppress abnormal cell growth, making it easier for cancer to develop.

However, most mutations to breast cells are acquired throughout a woman's life rather than being inherited. When we're exposed to cancer-causing chemicals or radiation that damages our DNA, genetic changes can occur that increase our chances of developing cancer.

As we learn more about the risk factors of this disease, we're better able to decrease our chances of developing breast cancer.

Prevention and Screenings

How can I protect myself against breast cancer?

While we don't have a definitive way to prevent breast cancer, we can lower our risks through prevention and screening.

Prevention

Here are some simple ways to help lower your risk of developing breast cancer:

- Eat a diet rich in healthy foods, like fruit and vegetables.
- Exercise and maintain a healthy weight.
- Avoid controllable risk factors like smoking tobacco and drinking alcohol.
- Consider medication and surgery as preventive measures if you're at higher risk.

Screening

Routine screenings empower your doctor to detect and treat breast cancer early. Talk to your doctor about when and how you should be screened for breast cancer with early detection tests like breast exams and mammograms. Together, you can watch for any breast changes and develop a plan to reduce your risk factors.





What are some controllable risk factors?

A risk factor is anything that increases your chances of developing a disease or injury. There are some risk factors that you can control and others that you can't. It is important to know these risk factors so you can talk about them with your doctor.

Controllable Risks

Your risk of developing breast cancer can be increased by:

DRINKING ALCOHOL

Any quantity, but drinking increased amounts further increases risk.

LIVING WITH OBESITY

Being obese or overweight, especially after menopause.

INADEQUATE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Getting less than the recommended 150 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise or 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity exercise per week.

PREGNANCY AND CHILDBIRTH TIMELINE

Not having children, or having the first child after age 30.

TAKING BIRTH CONTROL

Using some oral contraceptives.

UNDERGOING HORMONE REPLACEMENT THERAPY

Using hormone therapy with estrogen progesterone.

EATING AN UNHEALTHY DIET

Especially when combined with other risk factors like obesity.

SMOKING TOBACCO

Heavy smoking over time.

CHEMICALS

No specific environmental exposures to date have been shown to cause breast cancer or significantly increase its risk in humans, but many are being studied.

Uncontrollable Risks

Some risks for breast cancer are not in our control. These factors may increase your risk of breast cancer.

BEING A WOMAN

Men can get breast cancer, but it is 100 times more likely in women.

YOUR AGE

Being age 55 or older.

INHERITED GENES

Having an inherited mutation in the BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes.

FAMILY HISTORY

Having a close relative with a history of breast cancer.

PERSONAL HISTORY

Having breast cancer or a different cancer in the past.

RACE/ETHNICITY

Over age 45, white women are at a slightly increased risk compared to African-American women. Before age 45, African-American women are at a higher risk.

HAVE DENSE BREAST TISSUE

Having more granular (or dense) breast tissue.

HAVING BENIGN BREAST CONDITIONS

Having certain non-cancerous breast tissue conditions.

BEGINNING MENSTRUATION BEFORE AGE 12 OR MENOPAUSE AFTER AGE 55

Having more lifetime menstrual cycles.

EXPOSURE TO DES

Exposure to a drug called diethylstilbestrol (DES), which was used to prevent miscarriage in the 1940s through 1970s.

UNDERGOING RADIATION

Having a history of radiation therapy to the chest.





What are the warning signs of breast cancer?

One way to help protect yourself is to perform monthly breast self-exams so you can detect changes in your breasts and alert your doctor. This doesn't take the place of your other screening tests like mammograms, and should be done based on your doctor's recommendations.

When you do your monthly self-exam, look for the following warning signs:

- A painless, hard lump in the breast tissue
- Swelling of all or part of a breast
- Skin irritation or dimpling
- Breast or nipple pain
- Nipple changes, like retraction (turning inward)
- Breast/nipple skin changes (redness, scaliness or thickening)
- Nipple discharge (other than breast milk)

Diagnosis

Breast cancer is diagnosed through a variety of different screenings and tests. Usually, a team of medical professionals will work together to gather the specific information needed for a diagnosis.

Screening tests, like mammograms, are used to help find breast cancer very early, before someone might have symptoms, when it is small and hasn't spread to other parts of the body. The outcomes are generally better if breast cancer is detected and treated early.

A radiologist might read a mammogram or other imaging test and indicate breast changes that could be cancer. This usually prompts a biopsy of breast tissue to diagnose breast cancer. This diagnostic process can be different for each patient.



Treatments

How breast cancer is treated depends on a few factors, including its type and stage. Generally, breast cancer treatment involves local or systemic treatments or a combination of both.

Local treatments target the tumor without affecting the rest of your body. Examples of local treatments are surgery and radiation therapy.

Systemic treatments involve drugs (given by mouth or delivered directly into the bloodstream), which reach cancer cells wherever they are in the body. These treatments include chemotherapy, hormone therapy and targeted therapy.

Breast cancer treatment is often managed by a special team of doctors, including a breast surgeon, radiation oncologist and medical oncologist. Other specialized health professionals may be involved in your treatment, such as nurses, psychologists, physician assistants, nurse practitioners, nutritionists and social workers.

Comprehensive treatment plans can also include different phases of treatment, including breast reconstruction after the first phase of cancer treatment is complete.

Breast Cancer Program

The Breast Cancer Program at AdventHealth is dedicated to providing the highest quality breast cancer treatment.

Our team of medical oncologists, radiation oncologists, surgeons and specialists are committed to developing advanced therapies to treat breast cancer with the best possible outcomes. We offer leading-edge detection, treatments and research in one convenient location to make breast care more comfortable and accessible. Prioritizing personalized care for the body, mind and spirit, the Breast Cancer Program provides comprehensive care that also includes genetic counseling, spiritual counseling and support groups, designated breast cancer patient navigators, a patient-centered spa, clinical trials and specialized rehabilitation.

Let's talk in person.

For more information about the AdventHealth Breast Cancer Program, call 800-799-8138.

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