

Breast cancer: Are you at risk?

Breast cancer is one of the most common types of cancer in women. Each year, about 240,000 women—and about 2,100 men—are diagnosed with the disease, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.¹ Many risk factors, such as your genes and family history, cannot be controlled. However, a healthy diet and a few lifestyle changes may reduce your overall chance of cancer in general.²

About breast cancer

Breast cancer is a disease in which cells in the breast grow out of control. There are different kinds of breast cancer. The kind of breast cancer depends on which cells in the breast turn into cancer.³

There are two main types of breast cancer:

Ductal carcinoma. This cancer starts in the tubes (ducts) that move milk from the breast to the nipple. Most breast cancers are of this type.

Lobular carcinoma. This cancer starts in parts of the breast called lobules, which produce milk. In rare cases, breast cancer can start in other areas of the breast. Breast cancer may be invasive or noninvasive. Invasive means it has spread to other tissues. Noninvasive means it has not yet spread; this is referred to as “in situ.”³

Do you have, or have you recently noticed, any of the following?

- New lump in the breast or underarm
- Thickening or swelling of part of the breast
- Irritation or dimpling of breast skin
- Redness or flaky skin in the nipple area or the breast
- Any change in the size or shape of the breast
- Pulling in (retracting) of the nipple or pain in the nipple area
- Nipple discharge other than milk, including blood
- Pain in any area of the breast⁴

The symptoms above are warning signs of breast cancer.⁴ While these symptoms can happen with other conditions that aren't cancer, it's important to call your healthcare provider today to schedule an appointment if you're experiencing any of them. Oftentimes, there are no symptoms of breast cancer, so a regular mammogram is important to catch cancer at an early stage when it's easier to treat.

Keep in mind: Some people do not have any signs or symptoms at all.⁴ This is why it's important to have regular mammograms to help find cancer early, when it's easier to treat.⁵



Take the quiz below to help evaluate some of your risks for breast cancer.

Are you at risk for breast cancer? Check “yes” or “no” for each statement below.	YES	NO
Are you a woman?		
Are you over age 50?		
Have you tested positive for a mutation in the BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes?		
Do you have a first-degree relative (e.g., mother, sister or daughter) who has been diagnosed with breast cancer?		
Do you have a personal history of breast cancer?		
Did you start menstruating early (before age 12)?		
Did you start menopause late (after age 55)?		
Have you had radiation therapy to the chest area?		
Have you never been pregnant, or did you have your first child after age 30?		
Have you taken combination hormone replacement therapy (estrogen and progestin)?		
Are you overweight or obese?		
Are you physically inactive?		
Do you drink alcohol?		

Breast cancer risk assessment results

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the more times you answered “yes” to the quiz, the greater your risk for developing breast cancer.⁶

Regardless of your score, if you are age 40 or older, you should talk to your healthcare provider about when and how often to have a clinical breast exam and mammogram.

Talking about your risk factors with your healthcare provider

Discuss your breast cancer risk with your provider. Anything that increases your chance of getting a disease is called a risk factor. Having a risk factor does not mean you will get cancer; not having risk factors doesn’t mean that you won’t get cancer. If you think you may be at risk, you should talk to your provider.



Here are some questions to help get you started

- Am I at risk?
- How do you get breast cancer?
- Should I have a mammogram or other tests?
- What are the symptoms?
- What can I do to prevent breast cancer?
- If diagnosed with breast cancer, what are my treatment options?

Detecting breast cancer

Two tests are commonly used by healthcare providers to screen for breast cancer:⁶

- **Mammogram.** A mammogram is an X-ray image of your breast. This test may find tumors that are too small to feel and may also find abnormal cells in the lining of a breast duct, which may become invasive cancer in some women.⁷
 - Mammograms use very small doses of radiation, making the risk of harm extremely low. The benefits of detecting and treating a life-threatening condition like breast cancer far outweigh the very small potential harm from radiation exposure.⁵
 - **Note:** If a mammogram reports that a woman has dense breast tissue, it may require further testing to discover breast cancer, like an ultrasound or MRI. According to the Mayo Clinic, women with dense breasts are at a higher risk for breast cancer.⁸
- **Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI).** A breast MRI uses magnets and radio waves to take pictures of the breast. This tool may be used in combination with mammograms to screen women who are at high risk for getting breast cancer.⁵

You should also talk to your healthcare provider about performing a monthly self-exam at home.

Next steps

Organize your history, talk to your healthcare provider and, if screening is right for you, don't delay.



Remember: When breast cancer is found early, it may be easier to treat.⁷

Sources

1. "Breast Cancer Awareness", Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Last accessed August 9, 2024, <https://www.cdc.gov/cancer/features/breast-cancer.html>.
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3. "Understand a Breast Cancer Diagnosis", American Cancer Society, Last accessed August 9, 2024, <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/types/breast-cancer/understanding-a-breast-cancer-diagnosis.html>.
4. "What are the Symptoms of Breast Cancer?", Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Last accessed August 9, 2024, <https://www.cdc.gov/breast-cancer/symptoms/>.
5. "What Is Breast Cancer Screening", Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Last accessed August 9, 2024, <https://www.cdc.gov/breast-cancer/screening/>.
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7. "Breast Cancer Screening (PDQ)-Patient Version", National Cancer Institute, Last accessed August 9, 2024, <https://www.cancer.gov/types/breast/patient/breast-screening-pdq>.
8. "Dense Breast Tissue: What it means to have dense breasts," Last accessed August 9, 2024, <https://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/mammogram/in-depth/dense-breast-tissue/art-20123968>

This information is provided for educational purposes only. It is not to be used for medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Consult your healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns. Talk to your doctor before beginning an exercise program or making any changes to your diet.