

BREAST CANCER

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All women are afraid of becoming a victim of breast cancer, even though the reality is that with newer treatments and increasing knowledge about it, the chances of surviving this cancer are becoming better each year. Breast cancer ranks second most common cancer among all cancers in women, after non-melanoma skin cancers. According to information from the American Cancer Society, a woman has a lifetime chance of 1 in 8 of developing breast cancer, in other words 13 in 100 women will develop breast cancer in their lifetime. Women living in North America have the highest rate of breast cancer in the entire world.

Even though the incidence of breast cancer has increased in the last two decades, the survival rate is improving. One of the reasons for increasing incidence may be that more and more women are being screened by mammography and so more cancers are being found at an earlier and treatable stage. Notable is the fact that the incidence has increased only in women older than 50 years in the last few years, again possibly these women are being screened more often.

Breast cancer is the second leading cause cancer death in women, second to lung cancer. The chance that a woman will die of breast cancer is 1 in 33. In other words, 3 out of 100 women will die of breast cancer. Death rates from breast cancer have been declining possibly because of early detection and better treatment.

What are some of the risk factors for breast cancer? There are many factors that have been linked to breast cancer but none has been conclusively shown to be 'the cause' of breast cancer. Factors that a woman cannot change are
Gender: Being a woman is in itself a risk. Breast cancer is about 100 times more common in women than men according to the American Cancer Society statistics.

Age: As a woman ages, her risk of breast cancer increases. More than 75% of breast cancers are diagnosed in women above age 50 years.

Genetic risks: BRCA1 and BRCA2, certain gene mutations account for about 5 to 10% of the total cases of breast cancer.

Family History: The chances of getting breast cancer if a woman has two or more relatives, especially first degree relatives (mother, sister, daughter, which doubles the risk) with breast or ovarian cancer, if a relative was diagnosed with it before age 50, relatives with both breast and ovarian cancer, male relative with breast cancer.

Personal History of Breast Cancer

Race: White women are more at risk than African American women, however; the latter are more likely to die from it. Asian, Hispanic and Native American Women have a lower risk.

Previous Breast Biopsy with atypical hyperplasia: increases the chances 4 to 5 times.

Previous Breast Radiation

Early Menarche and late menopause

Diethylstilboestrol (DES)

Lifestyle factors also affect the risk, these are factors that can be modified. These are the following

Not having children or having a first pregnancy after age 30 causes a slightly higher risk.

Oral contraceptive use, current users have a slightly increased risk than a woman who has never used them.

Hormone Replacement Therapy: Use of postmenopausal hormones for more than five years increases the risk if estrogen and progestin are used together. Estrogen alone does not seem to increase the risk.

Breast feeding and pregnancy decreases the risk

Alcohol use increases the risk and the more one drinks, the more is the risk.

Obesity and high fat diet also increase the risk, especially if the weight was gained after or around menopause.

Physical activity decreases the risk. As little as 1.25 to 2.5 hours of brisk walking per week decreased the risk by 18%, according to the Women's Health Initiative (WHI) study.

Some popular myths are that breast cancer risk is increased with antiperspirants, underwire bras, induced abortions, breast implants, environmental pollutants such as pesticides, smoking, night-shift work. However; none of these factors have conclusively been shown to affect breast cancer risk.

Breast cancer is treatable if detected early. Breast self examination to find a lump, examination by a physician, and mammography are screening tools for early detection of breast cancer. Every woman should undergo a mammogram every 1 to 2 years between age 40 and 49 and after age 50, every year. Women who find a lump or if the physician finds a lump, a mammogram should be performed. Other tests such as an ultrasound or a biopsy of the breast may become necessary.

You can yourself help to decrease your chances of getting breast cancer by changing the risk factors that you can modify yourself such as maintaining a healthy weight, avoiding obesity, getting exercise regularly, avoiding alcohol use, breastfeeding your children. Make certain that you have a regular mammography especially after age 50 years.

If you have any concerns or questions please do not feel shy to ask, speak with your doctor and follow the advice given to you.

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