

What is breast cancer?

Breast cancer, like all cancers, causes cells in the body to change and grow rapidly. Breast cancer begins in the breast tissue, typically in the form of a lump or mass called a tumor.



Many types of tumors that form in the breast are benign, meaning they don't spread like cancer and are not life threatening. Some breast tumors are cancerous but do not spread beyond the area where they begin. Other cancerous tumors are more likely to spread. The seriousness of

breast cancer largely depends on how far the cancer has spread since being detected by a physician. Many types of cancer, including breast cancer, can be cured if detected early enough. Breast cancer usually has a poor outcome once it spreads. That's why breast cancer research has focused on early detection and prevention.

Statistics

- Breast cancer affects over 1.3 million American women today, with nearly 180,000 new cases diagnosed each year. Breast cancer leads to about 44,000 deaths annually in the U.S.
- A woman in the U.S. has a one in eight chance of getting breast cancer *in her lifetime*
- Women are 100 times more likely to develop breast cancer than men
- Nearly 97 percent of women diagnosed with breast cancer at an early stage survive for more than five years

What are my risks?

Every woman has some risk of developing breast cancer in her lifetime. But the risk is not the same for everyone. Several factors can increase your chance of developing breast cancer, including:

Age

Your risk of developing breast cancer increases with age, particularly over age 50.

Family History

Your risk of getting breast cancer increases if your mother, sister, daughter or other close relative has had the disease. Having one close blood relative with breast cancer doubles your risk. Having two close relatives with the disease increases your risk five-fold. If you've had a history of breast cancer or you've had a breast biopsy that turned up suspicious cells, your risk will also be greater.

Other Factors

Your risk of breast cancer may also increase:

- If you've never had children, or were over age 30 when your first child was born
- If you began menstruating at an early age (before age 12) or you went through menopause late (after age 50)
- If you are significantly overweight

What are the symptoms?

The most common sign of breast cancer is a new lump or mass in the breast. A lump that is painless, hard and has irregular edges is more likely to be cancerous,

however some rare cancer tumors are tender, soft and rounded. Other symptoms may include:

- A generalized swelling of a part of the breast (even if no distinct lump is felt)
- Breast skin irritation or dimpling
- Nipple pain or retraction, redness or scaliness of the nipple or breast skin
- Discharge other than breast milk

Many of these symptoms may also be due to benign breast conditions. Medical examinations and tests may be the only way to determine the cause.

How can breast cancer be detected?

Mammograms

Early detection of breast cancer is the key to survival, because not all the causes of breast cancer are clear. Regular mammograms are the best way to detect breast cancer early, when it is easiest to treat. A mammogram is an X-ray of the breast tissue. The test is quick and involves minimal X-ray exposure.

The chart below specifies the recommended breast screening exams and frequency based on your age. Women at particularly high risk or with a family history of breast cancer should talk with their doctor about earlier screenings.

Age 20 to 39	Clinical breast exam every three years, monthly self exams
Age 40 and older	Mammogram and clinical breast exam every year, monthly self exams

How can I reduce my risk of breast cancer?

- Physical activity, good nutrition and some drugs may lower your risk of breast cancer
- A low-fat diet has not been proven to prevent breast cancer, but it does decrease the risk of colon cancer, heart disease and other diseases
- Studies have shown that women who have two or more alcoholic drinks a day have a greater risk of getting breast cancer than those who don't drink

While we can identify some of the risk factors that increase a woman's chance of developing breast cancer, we do not yet know what causes most breast cancers. Research is underway to learn more, so stay informed and talk with your doctor.

Can breast cancer be treated?

Yes. Breast cancer treatment varies widely depending on the type and stage of cancer and the age and medical history of the patient. Treatment may include surgery (i.e., removal of a lump or breast), radiation therapy, chemotherapy and hormone therapy. If you are diagnosed with breast cancer, be sure to talk with your doctor about the advantages and disadvantages of different treatment options that may be available to you.

Early detection is the key to survival.



Other Resources

American Cancer Society's Breast Cancer Resource Center
1-800-ACS-2345
www.cancer.org

National Cancer Institute's Cancer Information Service
1-800-4-CANCER
(1-800-422-6237)
www.cis.nci.nih.gov

This material provides general information to help you better understand breast cancer. It's important to keep in contact with your doctor and have regular checkups. This information should not replace anything your doctor has told you about breast cancer. Instead, it should help you feel more comfortable talking with your doctor and help you make the best possible decisions about your health care.



WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT

Breast Cancer



BlueCross BlueShield of Nebraska