



Healthy Living and Personal Risk Guide



NATIONAL
BREAST
CANCER
FOUNDATION, INC.®

Introduction



One in 8 women in the U.S. will be diagnosed with breast cancer in her lifetime. That is a staggering statistic, but there is hope. While breast cancer cannot usually be prevented, there are things you can do today to help lower your risk of developing breast cancer.

In this resource, we aim to educate you on the different types of breast cancer risk factors, what you can do to lower your risk, and provide you with an assessment tool to determine your risk of developing breast cancer in the future.

As with all medical conditions, it is important to keep in close contact with your doctor to determine additional risk factors you may have and to report any signs, symptoms, or abnormalities you may be experiencing. A good rule of thumb is, "if you feel something, say something."

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What Causes Breast Cancer?

In order to reduce your risk of developing breast cancer in the future, it's important to first understand how breast cancer—and other types of cancer—develops. Cancer begins to grow and spread when a cell's DNA is damaged. This damage can be caused by either genetic factors or environmental and lifestyle factors, or a combination of the two. If you have the following [risk factors for breast cancer](#), you may have an increased chance of developing breast cancer in the future.



Genetic risk factors

Genetic risk factors are inherited, or passed down, from parent to child through the genes. Because these factors are built into your DNA from birth, they cannot be changed or reduced. However, knowing that you have certain genetic risk factors for developing breast cancer can help you stay vigilant about watching for [signs and symptoms of breast cancer](#) and keeping up with routine [breast self-exams](#) and screening [mammograms](#).

Genetic risk factors for breast cancer may include:

- **Gender:** Breast cancer occurs nearly 100 times more often in women than in men. While men also have breast tissue and can therefore develop [male breast cancer](#), the incidence of the disease is much higher in women.
- **Age:** Breast cancer mainly affects middle-aged and older women, with two out of three women with invasive breast cancer diagnosed after age 55. While the average age of a breast cancer diagnosis is 62, there is increasing evidence that breast cancer is affecting women at younger ages.

- **Race:** Breast cancer is diagnosed more often in Caucasian women than women of other races. However, Black and Hispanic women are more likely to be diagnosed with breast cancer at later stages, when cancer is harder to treat.
- **Family history:** If a first-degree relative, such as your mother, sister, father, or child, has been diagnosed with breast or ovarian cancer, you carry a higher risk of being diagnosed with breast cancer in the future. This risk increases if your first-degree relative was diagnosed before the age of 50. Remember that you get 50% of your DNA from your mother and 50% from your father, thus you should consider both parents and their biological relatives for incidences of having increased genetic risk for breast cancer.
- **Genome changes (mutations):** Mutations in certain genes, such as the [BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes](#), increase your risk for developing breast cancer, as well as other specific types of cancers. These mutations can be discovered through a genetic test.
- **Dense breast tissue:** Having [dense breast tissue](#) can increase your risk for breast cancer and make lumps harder to detect on a mammogram. Be sure to ask your doctor if you have dense breast tissue and require additional screening, such as an ultrasound or breast MRI. Beginning in September 2024, radiologists will be required to document in your mammogram report how dense your breast tissue is.
- **Personal health history:** If you have previously been diagnosed with breast cancer in one breast, you have an increased risk of developing cancer in the other breast in the future. Also, if you have previously been diagnosed with [lobular carcinoma in situ \(LCIS\)](#), which is a non-cancerous condition where abnormal cells are found in the lobules of the breast, you have an increased risk of developing breast cancer.

- **Menstrual and reproductive history:** Beginning menstruation before the age of 12, late menopause after age 55, having your first child at an older age, or never having given birth can increase your risk for breast cancer.

Environmental and lifestyle risk factors

Unlike genetic risk factors, environmental and lifestyle risk factors can often be avoidable and are typically under an individual's control. Reducing these risk factors can help lower your chances of developing breast cancer in the future.

Environmental and lifestyle risk factors for breast cancer may include:

- **Lack of physical activity:** A sedentary lifestyle with little physical activity can increase your risk for breast cancer.
- **Poor diet:** A diet high in saturated fats and lacking fruits and vegetables can increase your risk for breast cancer.
- **Being overweight or obese:** Obesity or being overweight can increase your risk for breast cancer. This risk increases if you have already gone through menopause.
- **Drinking alcohol:** Frequent consumption of alcohol can increase your risk for breast cancer.
- **Smoking:** Smoking, or being exposed to secondhand smoke, can increase your risk for breast cancer.
- **Radiation to the chest:** Having radiation therapy to the chest before the age of 30 can increase your risk for breast cancer. While radiation is often an unavoidable therapy for certain illnesses, it is still considered an environmental or lifestyle risk factor because it is not an inherited trait that someone is born with.

- **Combined hormone replacement therapy (HRT):**

Taking combined hormone replacement therapy, as is often prescribed for menopause, can increase your risk for breast cancer and increases the risk that the cancer will be detected at a more advanced stage. Speak with your doctor about the benefits and risks of HRT.

It is important to note that 70% of women diagnosed with breast cancer have no known risk factors, which means there are risk factors that haven't yet been identified, but hopefully will be in the future. This is why it is critical to also prioritize your breast health through early detection, such as [breast self-exams](#), [clinical breast exams](#), and [screening mammograms](#).

Healthy Habits



Leading a healthy lifestyle is a good way to help reduce the environmental and lifestyle risk factors you may face. A healthy lifestyle is recommended to protect your overall health and may help reduce your risk for certain cancers.

Here are a few tips to follow:

- **Eat the rainbow:** Eating 3.5 to 5 cups of fruit and vegetables a day can help you lower your risk of developing breast cancer. A diet low in saturated fat and high in fruits and veggies can also help you maintain a healthy weight, lowering your risk for obesity and breast cancer.
- **Get regular physical activity:** Moving your body or exercising for even 20 minutes a day can help reduce your risk of developing breast cancer, as well as increasing your overall health and wellness. Speak with your doctor about what types of physical activity or exercise is appropriate for you.
- **Maintain a healthy weight:** Being overweight or obese can increase your risk of developing breast cancer. Through a healthy diet and physical activity, you can reduce your risk of being overweight or obese, thereby reducing your risk of breast cancer.
- **Limit alcohol or don't drink:** Consider cutting back on alcoholic beverages or stop drinking entirely. The more alcohol you consume, the greater the risk.
- **Do not smoke or quit smoking:** Smoking and secondhand smoke exposure can lead to all kinds of health problems, including but not limited to increasing your risk of developing cancer.

Scheduling Exams

In addition to living a healthy lifestyle to reduce your breast cancer risk factors, it is vital to practice early detection of breast cancer through regular screenings. Detecting breast cancer at an early stage, when treatment is more likely to be successful, still provides the best hope for survival. **When detected in its earliest stages, the 5-year relative survival rate for breast cancer is 99%.**



This is why it is so important for you to schedule regular exams and screenings. Below you will find some general guidelines for breast cancer early detection methods. *You should always consult with your doctor to create a screening schedule that is most appropriate for you.*

Exam	Age	Frequency
Breast Self-Exam	18+	Regularly/Monthly
Well-Woman Exam	18+	Yearly
Mammogram	40+	Yearly

Assessing Your Personal Risk

A risk factor is a characteristic that increases the likelihood of developing cancer. By knowing about any personal risk factors you may have, you can be empowered to make proactive choices and decisions about your healthcare.



Use the questions below to determine if you have these risk factors for developing breast cancer.

Below are just a few breast cancer risk factors:

- I am a female:
Yes No
- I am over 40 years of age:
Yes No
- I have been previously diagnosed with breast cancer or ovarian cancer:
Yes No
- My mother, sister, father, and/or child has tested positive for a gene mutation that is associated with higher risk of breast cancer (i.e., BRCA1 or BRCA2):
Yes No
- I have tested positive for a gene mutation that is associated with higher risk of breast cancer (i.e., BRCA1 or BRCA2):
Yes No
- I have dense breast tissue:
Yes No
- I am overweight or obese:
Yes No
- I smoke or am exposed to secondhand smoke:
Yes No
- I consume alcohol frequently:
Yes No

If you answered “yes” to any of the above questions, you should speak with your doctor or healthcare provider to receive more details about your specific situation, to create a breast cancer screening schedule that is best for you, and to discuss if genetic testing or counseling is right for you.

The National Cancer Institute offers an additional breast cancer risk assessment online calculator. This free calculator uses a woman’s personal medical and reproductive history, as well as family medical history, to estimate her probability of developing breast cancer. Click here to access NCI’s [Breast Cancer Risk Assessment Tool: Online Calculator](#).