

3 WAYS TO PROACTIVELY PREVENT BREAST CANCER

Contributed by Mandy Enright, MS, RDN, RYT

Breast cancer is the second-most common type of cancer diagnosed among women in the United States after skin cancer. Approximately 30% of female cancer cases are breast cancer. While there is a 1 in 8 chance that a woman can develop breast cancer in their lifetime, there is also a 7 in 8 chance of not being diagnosed. The good news is that breast cancer incidences have been decreasing by 0.5% every year and deaths related to breast cancer have decreased by 1% every year since 2013. These decreases have been credited to early detection from screenings, increased awareness, and advances in cancer treatments. In honor of Breast Cancer Awareness Month, here are three key strategies you can take towards the prevention of breast cancer.

1. Get Screened

Early detection is the name of the game. Breast cancer that's found early while it's small and has not spread is easier to treat successfully. Getting regular screenings is the most reliable way to find breast cancer early. Early detection means finding and diagnosing a disease earlier than waiting for symptoms to start.

Depending on risk level, screenings are recommended as early as age 40 among women who are average risk. Talk with your primary care doctor or gynecologist to determine your risk level for breast cancer and when you should start having annual screenings. Screening methods include:

Mammograms: Low-dose x-ray of the breast. Mammograms can also monitor changes in breast tissue for early detection. Annual mammograms can lower the risk of dying from breast cancer. At this time, a mammogram is the best way to find breast cancer early for most women of screening age.

MRI: Magnets and radio waves that take pictures of the breast. Breast MRI is used along with mammograms to screen women who are at high risk for breast cancer.

Other types of exams include clinical breast exams performed by a medical professional and breast self-exams using hands to feel for lumps or changes. While these can be helpful to assess for potential changes in the breast tissue (including lumps, pain, or changes in size), breast exams are not considered as effective as a mammogram in the detection of breast cancer.

2. Genetic Testing

Women who are high risk for breast cancer are recommended to start getting annual screenings as early as age 30. One way to determine if you are at high risk for breast cancer is genetic testing. Genetic testing utilizes medical tests to look for certain mutations in genes that are linked to cancer. **Predictive genetic testing** looks for inherited gene mutations that might put a person at higher risk of getting certain kinds of cancer. An example is testing for changes in the BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes, which are known to increase the risk of breast cancer, in a woman whose mother and/or sister had breast cancer. Genetic testing is usually done when family history suggests there's a cancer that may be inherited.





Testing can be done on samples of blood or saliva, or from a cheek swab. Samples are then sent to a lab for testing. Genetic testing may be utilized for any of the following criteria:

- Several first-degree relatives (mother, father, sisters, brothers, children) with cancer.
- Many relatives on one side of the family who have had the same type of cancer.
- A cluster of cancers in your family that are known to be linked to a single gene mutation (such as breast cancer).
- A family member with more than 1 type of cancer.
- Family members who had cancer at a younger age than normal for that cancer type.
- Close relatives with cancers that are linked to rare hereditary cancer syndromes.
- A family member with a rare cancer, such as breast cancer in a male.
- Ethnicity (for example, Jewish ancestry is linked to ovarian and breast cancers).
- A physical finding that's linked to an inherited cancer (such as dense breast tissue).
- A known genetic mutation in family members who have already had genetic testing.

If you are concerned about a pattern of cancer in your family, cancer you've had in the past, or other cancer risk factors, talk to a health care provider about whether genetic counseling and testing might be a good option for you. Your health care provider can refer you to a genetic counselor in your area. You can also find a list of certified genetic counselors through the National Society of Genetic Counselors (www.nsgc.org) or the National Cancer Institute (www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/genetics/directory).

3. Cancer-Fighting Foods

While no one food is guaranteed to prevent breast cancer (or any type of cancer), certain foods and nutrients have been found to have benefits that protect cells, reduce inflammation, and promote a healthy weight. These include:

- **Plant-based foods** including fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes, beans, nuts, and seeds. These foods are rich in fiber, antioxidants, and phytonutrients that have been shown to reduce risk of cancer when consumed at most meals. Color = nutrients!
- **Omega-3s** found in fatty fish, nuts, seeds, and oils including salmon, almonds, chia seeds, hemp seeds, and flaxseed oil. The fats found in omega-3s have been shown to have anti-inflammatory properties that can reduce oxidative stress and keep cells healthy.
- **Coffee & Tea** contain potent antioxidants that can help protect against certain types of cancers. Red wine also contains cancer-fighting antioxidants when consumed in moderation (meaning one to two 5-ounce servings a few times a week).

Some foods can increase risk of breast cancer, including high consumption of processed foods, red meats, added sugars, and excess alcohol intake, and should be limited or avoided.

Taking these preventive steps early and often can help in the fight against breast cancer. Which of these are you already doing?



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