



FACT SHEET — *Breast Cancer*

Breast cancer is the most common form of cancer among American women, accounting for more than 30 percent of all cancers. Scientists do not know what causes breast cancer, and why one person gets the disease, and another does not.

Risk Factors for Breast Cancer

- ◆ **Age 40 or older** — The risk for breast cancer increases as a woman ages. Most breast cancers occur in women over the age of 50; the risk is especially high for women over 60.
- ◆ **Family history** — The risk of getting breast cancer increases for a woman whose mother, sister or daughter has had the disease. The risk increases if the relative's cancer developed before menopause or if it affected both breasts.
- ◆ **Personal history** — Women who have had breast cancer are at high risk for developing the disease again.
- ◆ **Never given birth or birth after 30** — Estrogen levels in the breasts of these women are higher than in women who have had children. This is because estrogen increases the rate of cell division, which increases the risk of cancer developing.
- ◆ **Long menstrual history** — Women who began menstruating at an early age (before 12) and/or having a late menopause (after 55) are at risk for breast cancer, because of the level of estrogen in their bodies.
- ◆ **Diet** — Breast cancer appears to be more prevalent in women whose diet is high in fat. Doctors recommend a low-fat diet, eating well-balanced meals with plenty of fruits and vegetables, and maintaining ideal weight to lower a woman's risk.
- ◆ **Understanding Risk** — Although it is true that 1 in 10 women will get breast cancer, this is a lifetime risk. Most women overestimate their risk of breast cancer. A forty year old woman with no risk factors has less than a 1 percent chance of getting breast cancer in the next 5 years. At 65 that risk would be 1.5%. Lung cancer kills more women than breast cancer every year in the United States. Heart disease, not breast cancer, is the number one killer of women.

Signs and Symptoms

The most common sign of breast cancer is a lump or thickening. A lump that does not change in the way it feels is a sign of breast cancer. Other signs are swelling, puckering or dimpling, redness, or soreness of the skin. The nipple may change shape or become crusty. Although early breast cancers are usually painless, any pain or tenderness that lasts throughout the menstrual cycle should also be reported to a physician.

Detection of breast cancer

Most breast lumps are found by women themselves or by their sexual partners. It is important for a woman to know her own breasts and examine them monthly for signs of change. Any changes in the breasts should be reported to a physician immediately. Women over the age of 20 should examine their breasts once a month. The best time is seven to ten days after the start of the period, when the breast swelling and tenderness is over. Post-menopausal women can perform breast self-examination (SBE) any time of the month. Recent well designed studies have shown that SBE is less effective than previously and may not save lives. This makes mammography even more important.



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Mammography, a low-dose X-ray of the breast, is able to detect changes that even a specially trained examiner cannot find. A woman with a lump or other symptoms of breast cancer should have mammography of both breasts as soon as possible, while women with no symptoms should have a screening by the age of 40.

Treatment available for breast cancer

Researchers are looking for more effective ways to treat breast cancer and possibly reduce the side effects of treatment.

◆ **Lumpectomy** — Often recommended for women with small tumors. The lump and the border of the surrounding tissue are removed and a few lymph nodes in the armpit will probably be taken out and a biopsy done to see if the cancer has spread there. A lumpectomy is always followed by several weeks of radiation therapy. Reconstruction of the breast may be recommended to make the breasts look more alike in size.

◆ **Mastectomy** — This could either be a partial or complete surgical removal of the breast, underarm lymph nodes, and/or the lining over the chest muscles.

Facts and Figures

- ◆ Each year, more than 18,000 women in the United States find out they have breast cancer.
- ◆ Breast cancer is one of the leading cancer killers of women.
- ◆ One out of 10 women will get breast cancer, but nine out of 10 could survive it.
- ◆ Approximately 15 percent of women treated for breast cancer will get the cancer at a later time.

The American Osteopathic Association (AOA) urges women to contact their osteopathic family physician for advice on preserving good health for an active lifestyle. Osteopathic physicians (D.O.s), physicians treating people, not just symptoms, are especially well qualified to assist in preventive healthcare since they are fully trained licensed physicians who have additional training that focuses on the body's structure and function, and its ability to heal itself. For more information visit the AOA's Web site at www.aoa-net.org.