

What affects your risk of getting breast cancer?

The causes of breast cancer are not fully known. However, researchers have identified a number of factors that increase (or decrease) the chances of getting breast cancer. These are called risk factors. Breast cancer is complex and likely caused by a combination of risk factors. Some factors you may be able to control (like exercise). Yet, some are out of your control (like age). Some are still unknown. Since you can only control some risk factors, you cannot avoid some amount of risk. For example, the two most common risk factors for breast cancer are being a woman and getting older.

Most risk factors that you have some control over only have a small effect on risk. This means there is no one behavior that will prevent breast cancer. But, it also means there's no one factor that will cause it.

Talk to your health care provider about your personal risk.

Some factors linked to a higher risk of breast cancer:

- being a woman
- getting older (breast cancer risk increases with age)
- an inherited mutation in the BRCA1 or BRCA2 breast cancer genes
- a family history of breast or ovarian cancer
- high breast density on a mammogram
- hyperplasia or lobular carcinoma in situ (LCIS)
- a personal history of breast cancer (including ductal carcinoma in situ (DCIS))
- exposure to large amounts of radiation at a young age
- never having children or having a first child after age 35
- younger age at first period (before age 12)
- older age at menopause (age 55 or older)

- alcohol use
- Ashkenazi Jewish heritage
- current or recent use of birth control pills
- current or recent use (for more than 5 years) of menopausal hormone therapy (postmenopausal hormone use) containing estrogen plus progestin
- being overweight or weight gain as an adult (postmenopausal breast cancer)
- not breastfeeding
- lack of exercise

Some factors linked to a lower risk of breast cancer:

- achieving and maintaining a healthy weight
- getting regular exercise
- limiting alcohol
- avoiding menopausal hormones containing estrogen plus progestin
- breastfeeding, if you can

Age: a major factor

A woman's chance of getting breast cancer increases with age.

If your current age is:	The chances of developing breast cancer in the next 10 years is:
20	1 in 1,681
30	1 in 232
40	1 in 69
50	1 in 42
60	1 in 29
70	1 in 27
Lifetime risk (up to age 85)	1 in 8

Get the facts on breast cancer

Because the causes of breast cancer are not fully known, there are many myths about the disease.

Myth	Fact
<i>I'm only 35. Breast cancer happens only in older women.</i>	While the risk of breast cancer increases with age, all women are at risk for getting breast cancer.
<i>Only women with a family history of breast cancer get breast cancer</i>	Actually, most women who get breast cancer have no family history of the disease. However, a woman whose mother, sister or daughter had breast cancer has an increased risk. Having a male relative with breast cancer also increases your risk.
<i>If I don't have a BRCA1 or BRCA2 gene mutation, I won't get breast cancer.</i>	Most women who get breast cancer do not have a BRCA1 or BRCA2 gene mutation. Only 5 to 10 percent of women in the U.S. who get breast cancer have an inherited gene mutation that increases risk.
<i>Women with more than one risk factor typically get breast cancer.</i>	Most people diagnosed with breast cancer have no known risk factors except being a woman and getting older. All women are at risk.
<i>You can prevent breast cancer.</i>	Because the causes of breast cancer are not yet fully known, there is no one way to prevent it. However, making healthy lifestyle choices may reduce the risk of breast cancer. For women at a high risk of breast cancer, the drugs tamoxifen and raloxifene can reduce risk.
<i>If I had a mammogram every year, I would be exposed to too much radiation, and that would cause cancer.</i>	The small level of radiation from mammograms is believed to be safe, with the benefits outweighing the risks.
<i>Breastfeeding increases my risk of breast cancer.</i>	Breastfeeding actually decreases a woman's risk of getting breast cancer, especially premenopausal breast cancer.

For more information about risk factors go to www.komen.org/risk

Related fact sheets in this series:

- Breast Cancer Detection
- Breast Density
- Genetics and Breast Cancer
- How Hormones Affect Breast Cancer

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