

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Understanding Breast Cancer and Breast Cancer Treatment Options

Breast cancer is the most common malignancy in women, and the second leading cause of cancer death —exceeded only by lung cancer. In 1960, one in 20 women could expect to be diagnosed with breast cancer at some point in their lives. Today, that figure is one in nine.

Breast cancer is not exclusively a disease of women. For every 100 women with breast cancer, one male will develop the disease. The incidence of breast cancer is low in women under 30, although it is a much more aggressive disease in younger women. After 30, the numbers rise and then increase dramatically after the age of 50.

Half of all breast cancer is diagnosed in women over 65, indicating the necessity of yearly screening throughout a woman's life.

If you or a loved one is concerned about breast cancer, remember that it does not have to be the death sentence it once was. It's also worth remembering that early diagnosis can often stop the cancer in its tracks.

Risk Factors

- The risk of developing breast cancer increases if a woman's mother or sister had the condition, particularly if it was at an early age.
- Women who have had breast cancer in one breast are at increased risk of developing it in the other.
- Most breast cancers occur in women over 50.
- Women who have produced estrogen for longer periods may be more at risk. This includes women who began menstruation early, never had children, entered menopause late or took hormone replacement for a long period.
- Women who were exposed to radiation therapy before age 30.
- Certain breast changes or types of breast density may also leave a woman more prone to developing breast cancer.

Things You Can Do

- Have an annual physical check-up by your doctor.
- Practice self-examination.
- Have a mammogram when you reach 40 and at least every two years afterwards.
- Follow blogs for healthy eating online with particular emphasis on low-fat, high-fiber whole foods.
- Drink alcohol only in moderation.
- Exercise regularly.
- If you are at high risk for breast cancer, talk to your doctor about other measures they might recommend.

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Signs to Watch for

See your doctor if you notice any changes in your breasts or in the underarm areas, including lumps, thickening, nipple changes and nipple discharge. Be alert for skin changes or changing breast size. Pain is not normally an early breast cancer symptom.

Diagnosis

- Final diagnosis can involve some or all of these diagnostic tools:
- Clinical examination
- Mammograms or X-rays of the breast
- Ultrasounds, which can show whether a lump is a non-cancerous cyst or a solid mass
- Needle biopsy, which involves removing cells and/or fluid from the breast via a fine needle
- Surgical biopsy, which surgically removes the lump and an area around it

Treatment Options

- Surgery to remove cancer in a specific area or to remove the breast. Surgery is sometimes planned to follow one or more other treatment options.

- Radiation to destroy cancer cells in a specific area.

- Chemotherapy to destroy or control cancer both in a local area and prevent spread.

- Hormone therapy to control cancer or prevent it returning.

Connect with your doctor or a professional for more information on breast cancer, ways to minimize your risks, treatment options and any other questions you may have about the disease. Education equals empowerment and will help you to deal with your concerns.