



# BREAST CANCER: A Concern For Generations

Some risk factors cannot be altered. For example, simply being a woman increases the risk for breast cancer, as does advancing age. Most breast cancers are found in women over age 40. Other risks can be modified. The ACS recommends 45 – 60 minutes of planned physical activity 5 or more days a week.

Breast cancer families are those in which breast cancer is inherited and family members are at greater than average risk of developing the disease. A determination of family inheritance is made through a detailed analysis of breast cancer across the generations. It is usually performed by someone trained in genetic analysis. The average woman's odds of developing breast cancer in her lifetime are about 1 in 8 (12%). Several cases could develop in a family merely by chance.

Mutations in two genes have been identified in members of high-risk breast cancer families. BRCA1 and BRCA2 have been linked to breast cancers occurring at an early age, so have the number of cases in a family, breast cancers in family males, and the incidence of ovarian cancer, in addition to breast cancer, in families.

After modifying risks that are amenable to change, the best opportunity to influence disease outcome lies in early detection and early treatment. Screening tests are used to detect a disease before it causes symptoms in the individual. Breast cancers that are found by feeling tend to be larger than ones found during screening.

Screening mammography is used to find breast cancer in women before it can be felt. Using low-dose x-rays, pictures are taken of the breast to be reviewed by a radiologist for evidence of disease. Conventional mammograms are done using film, which takes several minutes to develop.

Digital mammography is a newer technology which uses a computer (rather than film) to record x-ray images of the breast. It has the advantage of speed – the image is ready in less than a minute. Some clinical trials show it to improve diagnostic accuracy in patients with dense breast tissue - generally women 50 years old or younger. A recent study was done by Dr. Fred S. Vernacchia and Zachary G. Penn at a small community-based practice, the San Luis Diagnostic Center. The goal was to evaluate the impact on recall rates and cancer detection when converting from film to digital mammography. In this study, an increased number of breast cancers were found with digital imaging. More studies need to be done.

Having a mammogram is an important part of the health care regimen for women. ACS recommends an annual test for women 40 and older. Recommendations may differ for women at higher risk. It is always a good idea to discuss your specific health needs and concerns with your doctor.

You can't change your gender or your family history, but you can make an appointment for the appropriate screenings and any follow-up testing required. Make a pact with the women in your family to ensure that this generation and the ones to follow take control of their personal health.

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October is National Breast Cancer Awareness Month. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), breast cancer is second only to skin cancer in prevalence among American women and the leading cause of cancer deaths in Hispanic women. It is the number two cause of deaths from cancer in women overall - just lung cancer claims more. The American Cancer Society (ACS) estimates more than 192,000 women will be diagnosed with an invasive form of breast cancer and over 62,000 with a noninvasive form this year. Men get this disease, too, but women are about 100 times more likely to get it.

Great strides have been made in diagnosing and treating breast cancer. To date, discovering preventive measures has been more elusive. But medical science and research has demonstrated that women can lower their risks and increase their chances of survival. Risk factors include never being pregnant, having a family history of breast cancer, or practicing a sedentary lifestyle.