



Top 8 Risk Factors for Breast Cancer

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What Are the Risk Factors for Breast Cancer?

Breast cancer occurs when abnormal cells within the breast divide uncontrollably. It can affect men, as well as women, and it is the most common cancer according to the World Health Organisation, which is why it is good to know the risk factors for breast cancer to keep you and your loved ones safe and healthy.

Breast cancer cells are most commonly found in either the ducts which produce milk, or in the lobules which form glandular tissues. It is therefore most frequently categorised as either invasive ductal carcinoma or invasive lobular carcinoma. There are other categories of cancer which start in the breast, for example angiosarcoma, but these are less common than the ductal and lobular types.

Why Is it Important to Diagnose Breast Cancer Early?

Early diagnosis of breast cancer gives patients the best chance of survival. Survival rates have improved enormously in recent times, partly due to awareness and early detection. Advances in treatment options have also contributed to the reduction of deaths from the disease. According to Cancer Research UK, survival rates have doubled in the last 40 years, rising from 40% to 78%.

The most effective way to detect breast cancer at its earliest stages is using screening, such as a mammogram or ultrasound. These methods will often find tumours when they are smaller and less likely to be detected during a breast self-examination. A mammogram can detect a tumour up to two years before it can be felt by the patient or doctor. The cancer cells are less likely to have travelled beyond the breast into adjacent lymph nodes and beyond, making it easier to treat, which means having a higher likelihood of survival.

Self-awareness is vital, so it is important to be aware of the signs and symptoms of breast cancer so that you can see a doctor if you notice anything abnormal. Most lumps are benign, but it is always best to get them checked out as soon as possible, just in case it is something suspicious and further investigations are required.

What Are the Risk Factors?

It's important to know what factors could put you at a higher risk for getting breast cancer, as some are avoidable, and lifestyle changes can reduce the chances of getting the disease. Here are some of the common risk factors.

Age

The first risk factor for breast cancer is age, because the older you get the more likely you are to be diagnosed. Over 80% of breast cancers are diagnosed in people over 50 years old, which is thought to be because the older you get, the more likely you are to develop abnormal cells.

Family History

If a female relative has had breast cancer, particularly if they were under 40 when diagnosed, then you will have an increased risk of getting it yourself. Relatives can include your mother, daughter or sister.

Genetic Factors

Your risk of getting breast cancer is increased if you inherit one of the gene mutations such as BRCA1 and BRCA2. It is more likely that it will be diagnosed at a younger age and it affects both breasts rather than just one.

Reproductive History

Once you hit the ages where you experience periods and menopause, this increases your breast cancer risk. If you started periods early, before the age of 12, and went through the menopause late, after 55, then you will have been exposed to estrogen and progesterone for a longer time span, which puts you at a greater risk for developing breast cancer. If you had your first baby over 30, or have never given birth, then you are at a slightly higher risk too.

Ethnicity

In the U.S., the chances of getting breast cancer are much less if you are Hispanic. The statistics demonstrated on Susan Komen's website show that the lifetime risk of a breast cancer diagnosis is 13% for Caucasian women, 12% for African American and African Canadians, and only 10% for Hispanics.

However, these differences are mostly attributed to the different populations' likelihood of experiencing the other risk factors above. For example, Hispanic ladies are more likely to have children at a younger age, thus putting them at a lower risk.

Drinking Alcohol

Alcohol increases the risk of getting breast cancer and the more you drink the higher the risk. Drinking two to three units per day increases the risk by around 20% compared to non-drinkers.

BMI

If you are overweight after menopause, then you are at an increased risk of cancer. Interestingly, being overweight before the menopause actually decreases your risk, but if you gain weight as an adult then it increases again.

Hormone Treatments

Taking the birth control pill or HRT can slightly increase your risk of breast cancer.

Other Factors

Other lifestyle factors which can increase your risk of breast cancer include being unfit, as physical activity reduces the risk.

How to Prevent Breast Cancer

If you are at a greater risk of breast cancer, then regular screening will start earlier in life and should be more frequent. Your doctor can advise what the usual frequency is based on your specific circumstances, for example if you carry the BR1CA gene or have a close female relative who has been diagnosed.

How to Reduce Your Risk of Breast Cancer

If you notice that any of the above risk factors apply to you, then you can change your habits to reduce the risk of breast cancer. Drinking less alcohol, losing weight, and starting an exercise program will make you healthier and help reduce the risk.

Consider the use of the oral contraceptive or HRT and discuss with your doctor whether they could increase the risk of breast cancer. However, many of these factors only increase the risk very slightly, and even if you inherit the BR1CA or BR2CA gene, then there is no guarantee you will get breast cancer. Some ladies opt for a double mastectomy if they carry the gene, or have a strong family history, which reduces the risk by 90% to 95%, but it is a very personal choice which must be discussed with your doctor.