# 4 Steps to Take to Lower Your Risk of Breast Cancer

by ALISON RICHARDS

## Breast Cancer Prevention

With one in two of us likely to get some form of cancer in our lifetimes, it seems sensible to learn how to prevent it from happening in the first place. Although some cancers are unavoidable, there are definitely some which happen as a result of our lifestyles. For me, as a non-smoking, non-drinking, non-obese, healthy-eating, regular-exerciser, it was probably just bad luck that I was diagnosed with breast cancer. However, there are definitely risk factors you should be aware of, which can potentially increase your chances of getting this horrible disease. Let's learn about the steps to breast cancer prevention.

### What Are the Risk Factors for Breast Cancer?

Some of the risk factors for breast cancer are built within us, and therefore unavoidable. These include:

- **Age** — older people are more likely to get breast cancer than younger people.
- **Family history** — having a female relative who had breast cancer, particularly under the age of 40, will increase your own risk.
- **Genetics** — if you carry the BRCA1 or BRCA2 gene mutation then you are more likely to get breast cancer. It is also more likely to affect both breasts and happen at a younger age.
- **Reproductive history** — starting your periods before the age of 12 and going through the menopause after the age of 55, means you are at a higher risk of breast cancer. This is because you have been exposed to the estrogen and progesterone hormones for longer.
- **Ethnicity** — in the U.S., you are less likely to get breast cancer if you are Hispanic, compared with white or Black ladies.

Risk factors that you can control:

- **Alcohol consumption** — alcohol increases the chances of getting breast cancer and drinking just 2 to 3 units per day means you are 20% more likely to receive a diagnosis.
- **Being overweight** — if you are overweight after menopause, then you are more likely to get breast cancer.
- **Hormonal factors** — taking the birth control pill or HRT can slightly increase your risk of breast cancer.
- **Activity** — if you are more physically active, then you will reduce the risk of breast cancer.
- **Use of hair dyes and straighteners** — use of permanent hair dyes and chemical straightener treatments increases your chances of getting breast cancer.

### How Can You Prevent Breast Cancer?

Adopting a healthy lifestyle will reduce the chances of you getting breast cancer, so it makes sense to try and adjust any bad habits now. Not only will these reduce the breast cancer risk, but they will also reduce the risk of other cancers like bowel, liver, pancreatic and many other cancers.

**1. Reduce Alcohol Consumption**

Moderate to heavy drinking is associated with many different types of cancer, including breast cancer. Limit consumption to government recommended levels, or give it up completely if possible. Binge drinking is the worst type of alcohol consumption, and the Dietary Guidelines For Americans recommend up to two drinks per day for men and one drink per day for women, on days when alcohol is consumed.

**2. Eat a Healthy Diet**

Having a high BMI increases your chances of getting breast cancer, so it makes sense to eat a varied, healthy diet. A healthy diet should include:

- Plenty of fruit and vegetables, ideally consuming a range of colors to maximize the nutrients.
- Lean protein including fish, white meat and poultry.
- Healthy plant-based protein including tofu, quinoa and eggs.
- Legumes, such as seeds, nuts, beans and lentils.
- Dairy foods, including milk, cheese and yogurt.
- Wholegrain carbs, including brown bread, rice, pasta and noodles.
  Water consumption is vital too, and you should ideally drink at least 2 liters per day.

**3. Exercise Regularly**

Exercise doesn't have to be boring, and you should pick an activity that you enjoy. Walking is brilliant and was recommended by my breast surgeon for reducing the chances of my breast cancer recurring. You can use this time to listen to music, podcasts or meditation recordings. Audio books are great for combining entertainment with exercise.

If you exercise with a friend, then it will keep you accountable, as you are less likely to cancel. Group exercise classes are great motivators, as you cannot just walk out half way through.

Swimming is another great all-around exercise, and it doesn't put pressure on joints like weight-bearing options can.

There are a ton of free YouTube exercise videos available which allow you to exercise at home. Peloton became very popular during the pandemic when gyms were closed, and gives you access to top instructors from the comfort of home.

**4. Avoid Use of Hair Dyes and Chemical Straighteners**

Research has found a link between permanent hair dyes and breast cancer. The Sister Study surveyed women annually, asking about their lifestyle and health. They found that women who used permanent hair dye regularly were 9% more likely to be diagnosed with breast cancer. When using a permanent hair dye every five to eight weeks, African-American women were 60% more likely to receive a diagnosis compared to people who did not use permanent hair dye. White women were 8% more likely to be diagnosed with breast cancer if they used hair dye with the same frequency.

Chemical hair straighteners are also a risk factor for breast cancer. American Black women who use chemical hair straighteners are up to 30% more likely to develop breast cancer. The reason for this is the chemical formaldehyde, found in hair relaxers and straighteners, which is a carcinogen.

**Summary**

There's no doubt that adopting a healthier lifestyle will reduce your chances of getting diagnosed with breast cancer. You can make changes gradually, which will increase the likelihood of them becoming permanent, good habits. Life is short, and you sometimes only appreciate that when you have been through cancer treatment,

which is a shame. We should all do what we can to live a long and happy life!