

# Breast Health

## What is breast cancer?

Cancer is a disease in which cells in the body grow out of control. When cancer starts in the breast, it is called breast cancer. The breast is made up of three main parts: glands, ducts and connective tissue.

Sometimes breast cells become abnormal and grow faster than normal cells. These extra cells form a mass called a tumor. Some tumors are “benign,” or not cancerous. Other tumors are “malignant,” meaning they are cancerous and have the ability to spread to other parts of the breast and body and disrupt normal functions in those areas.

## Who gets breast cancer?

All women are at risk for breast cancer. Men can also get breast cancer, but this happens much less often. Not counting skin cancer, breast cancer is the most common cancer in women for all combined major racial and ethnic groups in the United States. Among Hispanic women, it is the most common cause of death from cancer, and it is the second most common cause of death from cancer among Caucasian, African American, Asian or Pacific Islander, and American Indian or Alaska Native women. In 2006, (the most recent year for which statistics are available), 191,410 women were diagnosed with breast cancer and 40,820 women died from the disease. Although more Caucasian women get breast cancer, African American women have a higher rate of death from breast cancer.

## How can I prevent it?

Scientists are studying how best to prevent breast cancer. Ways to help lower your risk of getting breast cancer include—

- Stay physically active by getting regular exercise.
- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Find out the risks and benefits of hormone replacement therapy and discuss with your health care provider if it is right for you.
- Limit the amount of alcohol that you drink.

## What raises a woman’s chance of getting breast cancer?

Several factors may affect your risk of developing breast cancer, including—

- Getting older.
- Not having children or having your first child later in life.
- Starting your first menstrual period at an early age.
- Beginning menopause at a late age.
- Having a personal history of breast cancer or certain benign breast diseases.
- Having close relatives (such as a mother, sister, brother, father, or daughter) who have had breast cancer.
- Having a genetic condition, such as certain mutations in your BRCA1 or BRCA2 genes.
- Having been treated with radiation therapy to the breast or chest.
- Being overweight, particularly after menopause.
- Using hormone replacement therapy for a long time.
- Drinking alcohol in excess.
- Being physically inactive.

*(more on back)*

Be Active // Be Healthy

## What are the symptoms?

When breast cancer starts out, it is too small to feel and does not cause signs and symptoms. As it grows, however, breast cancer can cause changes in how the breast looks or feels. Symptoms may include—

- A new lump in the breast.
- A change in the size or shape of the breast.
- Flaky, red, or swollen skin anywhere on the breast.
- A nipple that is very tender.
- Blood or any other type of fluid coming from the nipple (that is not milk).
- A lump that has changed.
- Pain in the breast or nipple that does not go away.
- A nipple that suddenly turns inward.

If you have any of these symptoms, talk to a health care provider. The symptoms may be caused by something other than cancer, but the only way to know is to see a health care provider.



## Is there a test that can find breast cancer early?

Mammograms are the best tests for finding breast cancer early. Mammograms are a series of X-ray pictures of the breast that allow health care providers to look for early signs of breast cancer, sometimes up to three years before it can be felt. When breast cancer is found early, treatment is most effective, and many women go on to live long and healthy lives.

## When should I get a mammogram?

Talk to your health care provider about when to start screening and how often. Talk to your health care provider if you have any symptoms or changes in your breast, or if breast cancer runs in your family. He/she may recommend that you have a mammogram early or more often than usual.

## What happens if my mammogram is abnormal?

If your mammogram is abnormal or more tests are required, do not panic. Many women need additional tests, and most are not diagnosed with cancer. An abnormal mammogram does not always mean you have cancer. It does mean that you will need to have some additional X-rays or other tests before your health care provider can be sure. Other tests may include an ultrasound (picture taken of the breast using sound waves) or a biopsy (removing tissue samples to be looked at closely under a microscope). You may be referred to a breast specialist or a surgeon, because these health care providers are experts in diagnosing breast problems.

## What should I expect during a mammogram?

The mammography machine is a special X-ray machine. One of your breasts will be placed on a plate. Another plate will press down on your breast from above. The plates will hold your breast still while the X-ray is being taken. These steps are repeated to get a view of the other breast. The plates are then turned to get side views of each breast. The mammogram only takes a few minutes. You will feel some pressure while the plates are pressing on your breast. Most women find it uncomfortable, and a few find it painful. What you feel depends on the size of your breasts, how much your breasts need to be pressed to get a good view, the skill of the technologist, and where you are in your monthly menstrual cycle, if you are still having periods.

## Resources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
National Cancer Institute  
American Cancer Society  
Susan G. Komen

[www.cdc.gov/cancer/breast](http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/breast)  
[www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov)  
[www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)  
[www.breastcancerinfo.org](http://www.breastcancerinfo.org)

### For More Information:

Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services  
Office of Women's and Men's Health  
301 Centennial Mall South - P.O. Box 94817  
Lincoln, NE 68509-4817  
Phone: 800.532.2227 Fax: 402.471.0913

[www.dhhs.ne.gov/womenshealth](http://www.dhhs.ne.gov/womenshealth) and [www.dhhs.ne.gov/menshealth](http://www.dhhs.ne.gov/menshealth)