

The American Cancer Society is the nationwide community-based voluntary health organization dedicated to eliminating cancer as a major health problem by preventing cancer, saving lives, and diminishing suffering from cancer, through research, education, advocacy, and service.

No matter who you are, we can help. Contact us anytime, day or night, for information and support.

# Cancer Facts for Women

1.800.ACS.2345  
[www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)

**Hope.Progress.Answers.®**



*The cancers that most frequently affect women are breast, colon, endometrial, ovarian, skin, cervical, and lung cancers.*

*Knowing about these diseases and what you can do can save your life.*

## Breast Cancer

Breast cancer is the most common cancer that you as a woman may have to face in your lifetime (excluding skin cancer). It can occur at any age, but it is much more likely to occur after age 40 and as you get older. Some women – because of certain factors – may have a greater chance of having breast cancer than other women. But if you are a woman and you are getting older, you should know about breast cancer and what you can do about it.

### ***What You Can Do***

The best defense is to find breast cancer as early as possible when it is easier to treat. Finding breast cancer early is called “early detection.” The American Cancer Society recommends the following guidelines for early detection:

- Women should have yearly mammograms, starting at age 40 and continuing for as long as they are in good health.
- Clinical breast exam (CBE) should be part of a periodic health exam, preferably at least every three years for women in their 20s and 30s, and every year for women 40 and older.

- Women should report any breast change to their doctors without delay. Breast self-exam (BSE) is an option for women starting in their 20s.
- Women at increased risk (family history, genetic tendency, past breast cancer, etc.) should talk with their doctors about the benefits and limitations of starting screening earlier or having additional tests such as breast ultrasound or MRI.

## Colon Cancer

Any adult can have colorectal cancer (commonly known as “colon cancer”), but most colon cancers are found in people over age 50. People with a personal or family history of the cancer or who have polyps in the colon or rectum or inflammatory bowel disease are more likely to have colon cancer. Also, eating a diet mostly of high-fat foods (especially from animal sources), being overweight, smoking, and being inactive can make a person more likely to have colon cancer.

### ***What You Can Do***

Colon cancer almost always starts with a polyp. Testing can save lives by finding polyps before they become cancerous. If precancerous polyps are removed, colon cancer can be prevented. Eating a low-fat diet that is rich in fruits and vegetables may also make you less likely to have colon cancer.

The American Cancer Society recommends one of these five testing options for all people beginning at age 50.

- Yearly fecal occult blood test (FOBT)
- Flexible sigmoidoscopy every five years
- Yearly FOBT and flexible sigmoidoscopy every five years (preferred over either of the first two options alone)
- Double contrast barium enema every five years
- Colonoscopy every 10 years

*Your doctor can help you make a decision about the best testing method for you. If you are more likely than others to have colon cancer, talk with your doctor about a different testing schedule.*

## Endometrial Cancer

Endometrial cancer (cancer of the lining of the uterus) occurs most often in women over age 50. Estrogen therapy without also taking progesterone, using tamoxifen for breast cancer treatment or to lower the chance for breast cancer, early onset of menstrual periods, late menopause, a history of infertility, never having had children, obesity, and diabetes slightly increase a woman's chance for this disease. Women with a personal or family history of hereditary non-polyposis colon cancer (HNPCC) are more likely to have endometrial cancer.

### ***What You Can Do***

Watch for signs and symptoms, such as unusual spotting or bleeding not related to menstrual periods, and report these to your doctor. At menopause women should be told about endometrial cancer and the limitations and benefits of endometrial cancer testing. Although the Pap test is very good at finding cancer of the cervix, it is not a reliable test for early diagnosis of endometrial cancer.

The American Cancer Society recommends that yearly testing with endometrial biopsy be offered by age 35 to women who have or are likely to have HNPCC.

## Ovarian Cancer

As with most cancers, ovarian cancer is more likely to occur as women get older. Women who have never had children, who have unexplained infertility, or who had their first child after age 30; women who experienced menopause after age 50; women who used hormone replacement therapy for more than 10 years; women who have a family history of ovarian, breast, endometrial, or colon cancer; and women who have had breast cancer are a little more likely to have this cancer. However, women who do not have any of these conditions can still have ovarian cancer.

### ***What You Can Do***

There are no effective and proven tests today for finding the disease early (like mammography for breast cancer). But you should see a doctor promptly if you have persistent symptoms of swelling of the abdomen, digestive problems (including gas, loss of appetite, and bloating), abdominal pain, feeling like you need to urinate all the time, pelvic pain, back pain, or leg pain. A pelvic exam should be a part of a woman's regular health exam.

## Skin Cancer

Anyone who spends time in the sun can have skin cancer. People with fair skin, especially those with blonde or red hair, are more likely to get skin cancer than people with darker coloring. People who have had a close family member with a melanoma and those who had severe sunburns before the age of 18 are more likely to get this type of skin cancer.

### *What You Can Do*

Most skin cancers can be prevented by avoiding being out in the midday sun for long periods of time. Wear hats with brims, long-sleeved shirts, and sunglasses. And use sunscreen with an SPF of 15 or higher on all exposed parts of the skin. If you have children, protect them from the sun and don't let them get sunburned. Look at your skin regularly and have a skin exam during your regular health checkups.

## Cervical Cancer

Cervical cancer can affect any woman who is or has been sexually active. It is much more likely to occur in women who have a virus called the human papilloma virus (HPV) which is passed

on through sex. Cervical cancer is also more likely to occur in women who smoke, who have HIV or AIDS, or are older and haven't had regular Pap testing. But any woman who has had sex can get cervical cancer.

### *What You Can Do*

Thanks to the Pap test, cervical cancer has become an uncommon cancer in the United States. A Pap test can find changes in the cervix that can be treated before they become cancer. The Pap test is also very effective in finding cervical cancer early, when it is highly curable. The American Cancer Society recommends the following:

- All women should begin cervical cancer testing about three years after they begin having vaginal intercourse, but no later than 21 years of age. Testing should be done every year with the regular Pap test or every two years using the newer liquid-based Pap test.
- Beginning at age 30, women who have had three normal Pap test results in a row may get tested every two to three years with either type of Pap test. But some doctors may suggest that testing be done more often if a woman has certain conditions such as HIV or a weak immune system.

- Women over 30 may also get tested every three years with either type of Pap test, *plus* the new HPV DNA test.
- Women 70 years of age or older who have had three or more normal Pap tests in a row and no abnormal Pap test results in the last 10 years may choose to stop having cervical cancer testing.
- Testing after a total hysterectomy (removal of the uterus and cervix) is not necessary unless the surgery was done as a treatment for cervical cancer or precancer.

## Lung Cancer

Smoking is the most common cause of lung cancer, but some people who do not smoke can also have lung cancer. Smoking is the cause for more than 80% of all lung cancers.

### ***What You Can Do***

Lung cancer is one of the few cancers that can often be prevented. If you are a smoker, ask your doctor or nurse to help you quit. If you don't smoke, don't start. If your friends and loved ones are smokers, help them quit. For help quitting, call **1-800-ACS-2345**.

## The Best Defense Against Cancer

*Early detection – finding a cancer early before it has spread – gives you the best chance to do something about it. Knowing about these cancers and what you can do can save your life.*