



Canadian Cancer Society  
Société canadienne du cancer

# Reduce Your Risk of Breast Cancer



Let's Make Cancer History

1 888 939-3333 | [cancer.ca](http://cancer.ca)

## Reduce Your Risk of Breast Cancer

“ *There was no history in my family. But the test was positive and it was breast cancer. I was so shocked, I couldn't believe it.* ~ Colette

If you are a woman aged 40 or older, this brochure is for you. Breast cancer is the most common cancer in Canadian women. One in 9 will develop the disease in her lifetime.

Breast cancer develops when cancer cells multiply in the breast tissue. Both men and women can develop the disease, but women are much more likely than men to do so. You are at higher risk because your breast cells are exposed to more estrogen and progesterone over a lifetime. These female hormones can stimulate the growth of breast cancer cells. And your chances of getting the disease increase with age.

The information in this brochure will tell you what you can do to reduce your risk and to make sure that breast cancer is detected early, when it is most easily treated.

## Early detection saves lives

“ *The tumour was new and invasive but it hadn't spread to the lymph nodes. I was very, very lucky. Trust me, if you can catch it early, it's so much better.* ~ Cathy

Many women are alive today because their breast cancer was detected early. Early detection means that cancer cells or precancerous conditions are found at an early stage, often before symptoms arise. This increases the chances of successful treatment.

Because early detection is so important, organized breast cancer screening programs across Canada offer regular testing even if you don't have symptoms.

Ask your doctor about screening programs in your area or contact the Canadian Cancer Society for more information. Our contact information is at the back of the brochure.

### ***What you can do*** ***Follow screening guidelines***

Mammograms are the best tool we have for early detection of breast cancer. A low-dose x-ray machine takes detailed images of the breasts from different angles. Lumps and other changes in breast tissue can be detected even if they are too small to be felt by hand.

## Breast cancer screening guidelines

### If you are 40 to 49:

Talk to your doctor about your risk of breast cancer, along with the risks and benefits of mammography.

### If you are 50 to 69:

Have a mammogram every 2 years.

### If you are 70 or older:

Talk to your doctor about how often you should have a mammogram.

During the procedure, the breast is placed between two plastic plates. These are then pressed together to flatten the breast. Compressing the breast tissue helps make the images clearer. This may be uncomfortable but it only lasts a few moments.

Your doctor may also do a physical examination of your breasts (a *clinical breast examination*).

“ *Have your mammograms! It may hurt a bit but it just lasts a few minutes and you’re out of there. And it’s so worth it.*  
~ Colette

## Most lumps are not cancer

If your mammogram shows an abnormality, you will need to have follow-up tests to find out whether it’s cancer or not. Tests may include additional mammograms, a breast ultrasound or biopsy.

Waiting for test results can be stressful. While you wait, remember that the problem may be something much less serious than cancer (for example, a cyst).

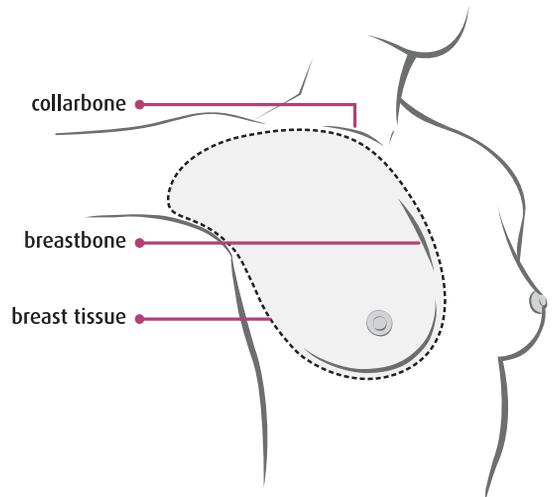
## What you can do Know your breasts

“ *I kept feeling something different inside one breast. I poked at it so much that my husband bugged me to see my doctor. I’m glad I did. It turned out I had precancerous tissue, which has now been successfully treated.* ~ Jennifer

Many women discover their own breast cancer by noticing changes in the look or feel of their breasts. In fact, becoming familiar with your breasts – no matter what your age – is one of the most important things you can do to maintain breast health.

There is no right or wrong way to check your breasts. Experts used to suggest a particular method be used every month. Newer research has shown that this isn’t necessary.

So feel and look at your breasts in whatever way feels right to you. Become familiar with the entire area of breast tissue – highlighted in the diagram below.



You may find that your breasts feel lumpy or tender before your period. This is normal. Breast tissue also changes with age. The goal is to become aware of what is normal for your breasts. And if something doesn't feel normal, talk to your doctor. He or she will do a physical examination and may send you for further testing.

“ *The shower is a great place to find something that doesn't feel right. It takes no time at all, just a couple of minutes.* ~ Cathy

### Changes to discuss with your doctor

- a lump or swelling in the breast or armpit
- a change in breast size or shape
- dimpling, puckering or thickening of the skin
- redness, swelling or increased warmth in the breast
- a nipple turning inwards
- discharge from the nipple
- crusting, scaling or ulcers on the nipple
- itching of the breast or nipple
- unusual breast tenderness or pain

## Knowing your risk

“ *I really didn't know what the risk factors were. I didn't have any family history so I thought I was safe.* ~ Jennifer

There is no single cause of breast cancer. But some things can increase your chances of developing the disease. These are called *risk factors*.

Having risk factors does not mean you will develop breast cancer. It means that your chances of developing the disease are higher. Some risk factors, such as being a woman, are beyond your control but others can be managed. It's always a good idea to know what your risk factors are.

We include here only those risk factors that have been proven by research to increase the chances of developing breast cancer.

**Personal and family history** can increase your risk if you:

- have had breast cancer before
- have one or more family members diagnosed with breast or ovarian cancer (especially a mother, sister or daughter diagnosed before menopause)
- have hereditary mutations in the BRCA1 or BRCA2 genes

If you do have a strong family history of breast cancer, talk to your doctor about your options. You might decide to have a genetic risk assessment, which can help you and

your doctor decide what options you have for reducing your risk of breast cancer or for detecting it early.

It's important to know that most women with breast cancer do not have a family history of the disease. Other risk factors are important.

**Above-average exposure to estrogen** can increase your risk. Estrogen exposure may be higher than average if you:

- have never given birth or gave birth for the first time after age 30
- began menstruating at a young age
- reached menopause later than average
- have taken hormone replacement therapy (especially estrogen plus progestin) for more than 5 years

**Radiation treatment to the chest area** can increase your risk, especially if you were treated for Hodgkin lymphoma before age 30.

**Some breast conditions** can increase your risk, including dense breast tissue (as shown on a mammogram) or a condition called atypical hyperplasia (as shown by a breast biopsy). Most common breast conditions, such as cysts, do not increase the risk of breast cancer.

**Lifestyle factors** that can increase your risk include:

- being overweight, especially after menopause
- drinking alcohol
- taking birth control pills (“the pill”) that combine estrogen and progesterone

Many other possible risk factors require further study. Research is underway to determine if they increase the chances of breast cancer. For up-to-date information, you can contact us.

### ***What you can do*** ***Talk to your doctor***

It's important for all women to talk to their doctor about their risk of developing breast cancer. This is true even if you have no family history of the disease.

Your doctor can assess your risks and discuss risk reduction strategies with you. Your doctor can also answer any questions you may have about the risks and benefits of mammography.

### **Questions to ask your doctor about breast cancer**

- What are my personal risk factors?
- Does my family history put me at higher than average risk?
- What can I do to reduce my risk?
- What tests are available to me?
- What are the risks and benefits of these tests?
- What are the costs for these tests?
- How often should I be tested?

## ***What you can do*** ***Make lifestyle changes to reduce risk***

Here are some things you can do to reduce your risk. There are no guarantees that doing these things will prevent breast cancer. But research tells us they can lower your chances of developing the disease.

### **Maintain a healthy body weight**

Being overweight increases the risk of breast cancer in post-menopausal women. Physical activity can lower your risk. Women who exercise also tend to have less body fat, which can influence hormone levels.

Talk to your doctor about what is a healthy weight for you and ways to reach or maintain it. In addition to lowering your breast cancer risk, you will be improving your overall health and quality of life.

### **Don't drink too much alcohol**

Studies show that drinking even moderate amounts of alcohol increases your risk of breast cancer. The more you drink, the greater the risk. So if you choose to drink, limit it to less than one drink a day.

### **Avoid hormone replacement therapy**

Several large international studies have shown that hormone replacement therapy (HRT) increases your risk of breast cancer. And the risk increases the longer you take it. For these reasons, the Canadian Cancer Society recommends that women avoid taking

HRT unless they have severe menopausal symptoms that have not responded to any other treatments.

The decision on whether to use HRT is personal and should be made in consultation with your doctor. If you and your doctor decide that the benefits of HRT outweigh the risks, take the lowest possible dose for the shortest period of time.

### **Factors *not* associated with breast cancer**

Research has confirmed that the following things are *not* risk factors for breast cancer:

- stress
- antiperspirants or deodorants
- bras
- breast implants
- abortion





## What we do

The Canadian Cancer Society fights cancer by:

- doing everything we can to prevent cancer
- funding research to outsmart cancer
- empowering, informing and supporting Canadians living with cancer
- advocating for public policies to improve the health of Canadians
- rallying Canadians to get involved in the fight against cancer

Contact us for up-to-date information about cancer, our services or to make a donation.



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TTY 1 866 786-3934

## PREVENTING CANCER



*Get involved* **Live well** *Be aware* *Get involved*  
*Get involved* **Be aware** *Get involved* **Live well**  
*Live well* **Get involved** *Live well* **Be aware**

This is general information developed by the Canadian Cancer Society. It is not intended to replace the advice of a qualified healthcare provider.

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