



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 can spread to other parts of the body and disrupt normal functions in those areas.

What puts me at greater risk?

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

- Gender (women have a higher risk).
- Age (over 40 for women, 50 for men).
- Having your first menstrual period before age 12.
- Starting menopause after age 55.
- Having dense breast tissue.
- Having a personal history of breast cancer, ovarian cancer, or certain benign breast diseases, such as atypical ductal hyperplasia.
- Having close family relatives (such as a mother, sister, father, or daughter) who has had breast and/or ovarian cancer.
- Having genetic mutations, such as certain mutations in your BRCA1 or BRCA2 genes or Klinefelter syndrome (men risk factor only).
- Not having children, or having your first child later in life.
- Having been treated with radiation therapy to the breast or chest.
- Being overweight, particularly after menopause.
- Taking hormone replacement therapy (those including estrogen and progesterone) taken in menopause for more than five years. Certain oral contraceptives can also increase risk.
- Drinking alcohol.
- Being physically inactive.

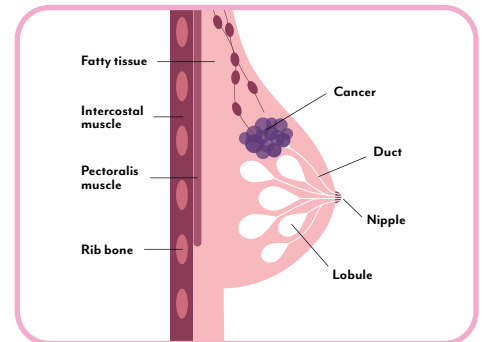
What are the symptoms?

When breast cancer starts out, it is too small to feel and does not cause signs or 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 or underarm
- Thickening or swelling anywhere on the breast



Did you know...

- Breast cancer is the most common cancer found in women who are Alaskan Native and/or American Indian.
- Breast cancer mostly occurs in women who are older, however in rare cases, breast cancer can affect women who are under the age of 45. About 9% of new cases of breast cancer in the United States are found in women who are younger than 45.
- Men are also at an increased risk of breast cancer, high-grade prostate cancer, and pancreatic cancer if there are mutations to the BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes.



- Any change in the size or shape of the breast
- Pain in the breast or nipple that does not go away
- Irritation, dimpling, or redness anywhere on the breast or nipple area
- Discharge from the nipple other than breast milk, including blood

These symptoms may be caused by something other than cancer, but the only way to know is to get checked. Know what is normal for you (breast self-awareness) and talk to your provider if you notice any changes.

How do I find out if I have breast cancer? Screening – Early Detection is Key.

Alaska Native and American Indian women should begin having routine screenings for breast cancer at the age of 40. Women under the age of 40 should talk to their health care provider about when to start screening, how often they should be screened, and which screening is best for you.

- Mammogram: recommended annually after the age of 40. This is the best way to detect cancer early when it is easier to treat and before it is big enough to feel or cause symptoms.
- Breast Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI): These are used along with mammograms to screen women who are high risk.
- Breast self-awareness: know what is normal for you and talk to your provider if you notice changes that are concerning to you.
- Clinical breast exam.

If you have any risk factors or symptoms of breast cancer, talk to your provider. If your mammogram is abnormal or more tests are required, do not panic. An abnormal mammogram does not always mean you have cancer. It does mean that you will need to have additional imaging or other tests before your provider can be sure. You may be referred to a breast specialist or surgeon because these providers are experts in diagnosing breast health issues. Other tests may include:

- Breast ultrasound: picture taken of the breast using sound waves.
- Diagnostic mammogram: This is a more detailed X-ray of the breast. If there is an area of concern in the breast, such as lump or abnormality, detected on the screening mammogram, providers may request this type of image.
- Breast Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI).
- Biopsy: this is removal of a small tissue sample that will be further examined under a microscope.

How can I lower my risk of breast cancer?

Although there is not yet a way to prevent breast cancer, there are things you can do to help reduce your risk of breast cancer.

- Eat well, everyday.
- Stay physically active with regular exercise at least 150 minutes each week.
- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Avoiding hormone replacement therapy (HRT) or finding out the risks, benefits, and if it is right for you.
- Don't drink alcohol or limit the amount of alcohol you drink to no more than one per day.
- Stay or become tobacco free.
- Breastfeed, if possible.

Sources:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Breast Cancer (Oct. 2021). https://www.cdc.gov/cancer/breast/basic_info/index.htm

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National Native Network Keep It Sacred. Cancer (Oct 2021). <https://keepitsacred.itcmi.org/cancer/cancer-prevalence/>