Breast Cancer Awareness Should Last All Year

Every year more than 245,000 women and men are diagnosed with breast cancer. And, while according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention deaths from breast cancer are declining, breast cancer is still the second leading cause of cancer death among women.

Risk factors

Most breast cancer is found in women age 50 and older. This does not mean younger woman are not affected by the disease.

There are a combination of risk factors that can influence your likelihood of developing breast cancer. In addition to age, there are genetic issues that increase your risk. For example, women with mutations to genes such as BRCA1 and BRCA2 have a higher rate of breast cancer.

Other key factors include:

- **Family history**: Your risk of developing breast cancer increases if your mother, sister or daughter had breast cancer. It may also increase if multiple family members have had breast cancer.
- **Personal history**: Women and men who have a history of breast cancer or other noncancerous breast diseases are more likely to get breast cancer a second time. Similarly, if you had radiation therapy to the chest or breasts before age 30, you have a higher degree of getting breast cancer later in life.

- **Reproductive history**: Women who began menstruating before age 12 or started menopause after age 55 have a greater risk of breast cancer. So do women who had their first child after age 30.

### The importance of regular health screenings

Everyone, regardless of their level of risk, should be screened regularly for breast cancer.

- **Self-exams**: Each month, women and men should examine their breasts. Look for any changes in the breast or armpit, including lumps, thickening, swelling, irritation and pain.

- **Clinical exam**: Your health care provider will talk to you about any symptoms you may be having, examine your breasts and recommend any follow up treatment.

- **Mammograms**: According to the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force, women with average risk of developing breast cancer should be screened as follows:
  - **Ages 40-49**: talk to your health care provider. Some women ages 40-44 may not need mammograms based on their family and medical history. Women ages 45-50 may need an annual exam based on certain risk factors.
  - **Ages 50-74**: should be screened once every two years

- **Advanced screenings**: You may also need to see a specialized radiologist who can perform ultrasounds, digital and 3-D mammograms, MRIs and even molecular breast imaging. Your health care provider will let you know if this is necessary.

### Symptoms

In most cases, the earlier you find any sign of breast cancer the easier it is to treat. Be on the watch for:

- Pain in any area of the breast
- Any new lumps in the breast or armpit
- Any change to existing lumps in the breast or armpit
- Any change in the size or the shape of the breast
- Any change to the skin on the breast
- Any nipple discharge

It is important to remember that these signs alone do not mean you have breast cancer. They can be symptoms of less serious conditions. They may even result in nothing.
Regardless, you should see a health care provider as soon as possible if you have any of these symptoms. If it is breast cancer, the earlier you receive treatment, the more chance you have to beat it.

**Breast cancer in men**

Less than 1% of all breast cancer occurs in men. Of those diagnosed with breast cancer, the average age is 68.

However, men should still examine their breasts every month and look for the same signs as women. If you have increased levels of estrogen you may be at a higher risk than other men, so be sure to talk to your health care provider.

Also, be aware of abnormal BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes, family history and radiation exposure to your chest at a young age. These are all risk factors for increased chance of developing breast cancer.

**Diagnosing breast cancer**

Breast cancer in women and men is often determined by which cells in the breast are affected. Carcinomas, or tumors, are the most common types of breast cancer. These tumors can line organs and tissues throughout the body. With breast cancer, the carcinoma most often starts in the ducts or glands of the breast.

A biopsy of the carcinoma is done to determine the specific type of cancer and if it has spread to the surrounding tissues. There are different types of biopsies that can remove tissue or fluid from the breast to be studied under a microscope.

Any further testing is called "staging." It helps providers know the type and stage of the breast cancer. It also helps them determine what type of treatment is needed. For women, this testing may include diagnostic mammograms, and more detailed X-rays of the breast.

**Advanced breast cancer**

Stage 4 metastatic breast cancer, or advanced breast cancer, can be more difficult to diagnose. This is because the cancer has spread to the lymph system, bones, liver, lungs or other areas of the body.

In these cases, you will most likely be referred to a specialist or a surgeon. You may also undergo additional screenings like ultrasounds, MRIs, digital and 3-D mammograms, and molecular breast imaging.

**Treating breast cancer**
There are many ways to treat this disease.

- **Surgery**: the cancer tissue is removed
- **Chemotherapy**: the cancer cells shrink or die as the result of special medication
- **Radiation therapy**: the cancer cells are killed using high-energy rays similar to X-rays
- **Hormonal therapy**: the cancer cells are blocked from the hormones needed to grow
- **Biological therapy**: the cancer cells are attacked by your body's immune system

Patients work closely with their health care provider to determine what course of treatment is best.

**Prevention is the best medicine**

While no one can guarantee you will never get breast cancer, there are certain behaviors you can adopt to reduce your risk.

- **Get your exercise**: Physically active individuals have a lower risk for breast cancer.
- **Maintain a healthy weight**: Women who are overweight after menopause have an increased risk of breast cancer.
- **Limit alcohol use and do not smoke**: The more you drink and smoke, the higher your risk for breast cancer becomes.
- **Talk to your health care provider about hormone therapy**: Some hormone replacement therapy that includes progesterone and estrogen increase the risk of breast cancer.

If you would like more information about breast cancer, there are a number of resources you can contact.

- **American Cancer Society**
- **National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program**
- **National Breast Cancer Foundation**

These sites can show you how to lower your risk and what to look for in monthly self-exams. They can also help you find a health care provider in your area, get the support you need if you are diagnosed with breast cancer and research treatment options.
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