

Five things everyone should know about breast cancer

October 4 2017, by Anne Doerr



Mammograms showing a normal breast (left) and a breast with cancer (right).
Credit: Public Domain

In 2017, the American Cancer Society estimates more than 250,000 new cases of breast cancer will be diagnosed in the United States, with more than 40,000 deaths. But progress in treatment and early detection has led to improved survival rates, with more than 3 million breast cancer survivors in the U.S. today.

With October marking National Breast Cancer Awareness Month, Anees Chagpar, M.D., M.P.H., a [breast cancer](#) expert and assistant director for Global Oncology at Yale Cancer Center, sorts out the facts about [breast cancer](#) and offers simple ways to reduce risk.

1. Know the risk factors

The two main risk factors for developing breast cancer are being a woman and getting older. Other important risk factors for breast cancer include family history of the disease, and inherited changes or mutations to certain genes, such as BRCA1 and BRCA2. "These risk factors for breast cancer are beyond your control," said Chagpar. "However, there are [risk factors](#) you can control, such as watching your weight, being physically active, and limiting alcohol consumption."

2. Know the warning signs

The warning signs of breast cancer are not the same for all women. Most commonly, breast cancer is asymptomatic, and often appears on a mammogram before a lump can be felt. There are, however, other red flags. "Also look for skin changes – redness, thickening of the skin, irritation around the nipple," said Chagpar. "Other [warning signs](#) include nipple discharge." Interestingly, Chagpar adds, most breast cancers are not tender; and most painful breast masses don't hurt. If you're concerned, you should see your doctor.

3. Mammograms save lives

Due to mammography screening, most breast cancers in the U.S. are found at an early stage. However, there has been a great deal of controversy about the value of performing a routine self-breast exam. "Self-breast exams help women be familiar with their breasts so they are

better able to notice a lump or any other changes," said Chagpar. "But randomized controlled trials have found that mammograms actually improve survival." Professional organizations vary in terms of their recommendations with regards to when to start having mammograms, how often to have them and when to stop, but all agree on having mammograms at least every two years from the age of 50-74.

4. New research is showing promise

Researchers around the world are working to find better ways to prevent, detect, and treat breast cancer, and to improve the quality of life of patients and survivors. Thanks to advances in the last decade, new targeted therapies offer more treatment options for patients. "Scientists like the ones here at Yale Cancer Center are working on developing new treatments for breast cancer," said Chagpar. "Research is also being done concerning the causes of breast cancer, how to prevent it and improving our imaging techniques to find it."

5. Breast cancer doesn't just target women

Although many more women get breast cancer, men can also be affected by the disease. Men diagnosed with breast cancer at an [early stage](#) have a good chance for a cure, but many men delay seeing their doctors if they discover signs or symptoms, such as a [breast lump](#). "It's important to remember that 1 percent of all [breast](#) cancer occurs in men," said Chagpar. "Men don't get screening mammography, so it's important that if they notice a lump or nipple discharge, like blood, they should have this checked out."

More information: For more information:
[www.yalecancercenter.org/patie ... ms/breast/index.aspx](http://www.yalecancercenter.org/patie...ms/breast/index.aspx)

Provided by Yale University

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