Breast cancer is the most common cancer in the UK and one in nine women in the UK will develop the disease at some point in their lifetime. However, it’s important to remember that more women than ever before are surviving breast cancer due to better awareness, better treatments and better screening.

What can make a difference to your chances of developing breast cancer in the first place? This series of fact sheets aims to give you information regarding what is currently known about some of the breast cancer risk factors.

Breast cancer is thought to be caused by a combination of our genes, lifestyle and environment. Risk factors are things that may increase or decrease the chances of getting the disease. Having one or more risk factors does not necessarily mean that you will or will not get breast cancer – it means that the chances of you developing the disease are greater or smaller. Often there is not a clear cut-off point when it comes to having or not having many of the established risk factors: instead there is a gradual increase or decrease in risk.

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**DOES DRINKING ALCOHOL AFFECT YOUR CHANCE OF GETTING BREAST CANCER?**

Many research studies show that regularly drinking alcohol is associated with a slightly higher risk of breast cancer. They show that the more you regularly drink, the higher your chance of getting breast cancer at some point in your life. Women who usually drink only a little alcohol on a regular basis may have only a very small increased risk of breast cancer compared with women who don’t drink at all.

**HOW DOES ALCOHOL INCREASE THE RISK OF BREAST CANCER?**

We are still not entirely sure how alcohol increases the risk of breast cancer. Drinking alcohol changes the levels of hormones that you have in your body, including the female sex hormone oestrogen. Oestrogen is essential for breast development during puberty and for the functioning of the female reproductive system and menstrual cycle. It also acts to help maintain healthy bones and heart. However, this hormone is known to stimulate the growth of many breast cancers. Some research studies have found that oestrogen levels are higher in women who drink more alcohol; this may increase the chance of breast cancer starting to develop. There may be other ways that alcohol increases the risk of breast cancer; however, these are not yet clear from the research studies.

**HOW MUCH OF A RISK IS DRINKING ALCOHOL?**

We can explain this by comparing what happens in 100 women who do not drink alcohol at all with 100 women who drink about one unit of alcohol per day. Imagine the 100 women who do not drink alcohol. Over a lifetime of over 85 years, probably 11 of these women will develop breast cancer.

Then think of the 100 women who usually drink about one unit of alcohol per day – about 12 of them will get breast cancer in their lifetimes. So drinking one unit of alcohol per day probably causes an extra one woman out of 100 to get breast cancer.

It is not possible to predict exactly who will get breast cancer. Although we know that, on average, women of all ages who drink alcohol have a slightly higher risk of developing breast cancer than women who do not, other factors will also play a part in why some develop the disease and others don’t.

We can present these risks visually, as well as in numbers. The charts that follow show the relative risk of drinking alcohol on the development of breast cancer. Different people may view the change in risk as large or small.

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**NUMBER OF UNITS OF ALCOHOL IN common DRINKS:**

A single pub measure of spirits is **1 unit**.

An alcopop is **around 1.5 units**.

A pint of ordinary strength lager, bitter or cider is **2 units**.

A 175ml glass of wine (small pub measure) is **around 2 units**.

A pint of strong lager is **3 units**.

A 250ml glass of wine (large pub measure) is **around 3 units**.
Number of women developing breast cancer in their lifetime

The pink circles represent the number of women expected to get breast cancer at some point during their lifetime. Remember, it’s not possible to predict which of these 100 women will develop breast cancer.

How much does drinking alcohol affect breast cancer risk?

The pattern is that the more alcohol women drink, the higher their chance of getting breast cancer in their lifetime.

It’s not yet known whether drinking a lot of alcohol on just one or two days a week (often referred to as binge drinking) leads to a higher risk of breast cancer than drinking the equivalent amount but spread evenly throughout the week.

**DOES THE KIND OF ALCOHOL YOU DRINK AFFECT BREAST CANCER RISK?**

No. Current evidence suggests that all types of alcohol, including wine, beer and spirits, are associated with an increased risk of breast cancer.

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**ALCOHOL & BREAST CANCER RISK: THE FACTS**
WHAT DOES BREAKTHROUGH THINK?

The research studies show that women who drink alcohol daily are slightly more likely to develop breast cancer than women who don’t drink at all. The more you drink regularly, the higher your risk of developing breast cancer. If you are very concerned about your chances of getting breast cancer then you may feel you want to keep your regular alcohol intake as low as possible.

There can be both benefits and harmful effects from drinking alcohol. In women who have been through the menopause, drinking one unit of alcohol per day can protect against heart disease. However, as well as increasing breast cancer risk, alcohol can also increase the risk of other diseases, such as liver disease and other types of cancer, as well as increasing the risk of accidents. Breakthrough thinks that each woman should decide how much alcohol to drink, having considered what the risks and benefits mean to her.

Unlike many other established breast cancer risk factors, alcohol consumption is something you can change. The important message is to be aware of how many units of alcohol you are consuming and to drink in moderation. The Department of Health recommends that women drink no more than 2–3 units of alcohol per day. If you drink alcohol to relax, you could try some other ways to unwind – such as gentle exercise or taking a bath. Refraining from alcohol on one day should not mean you drink more on another. Although no studies have investigated the effects of binge drinking on breast cancer risk, all women should avoid binge drinking (drinking more than six units of alcohol in one day) since it is associated with a number of other health problems.

OUR RESEARCH

Breast cancer is a complex disease and we do not believe that there is any one single factor that is responsible for causing it. Breakthrough is supporting the Breakthrough Generations Study, in partnership with The Institute of Cancer Research, which will investigate the causes of breast cancer and, in particular, gain information about causes that might be preventable. Launched in 2004, this will be the largest, longest running study of its kind. It will follow 100,000 women from across the UK over 40 years. It is likely that a combination of factors contribute to breast cancer. By examining the effects of genetic, environmental, behavioural and hormonal factors, we hope that the study will pinpoint the causes of breast cancer and how we can prevent this disease in the future.