BREAST CANCER
How to spot the symptoms and reduce your risk

cruk.org
Breast cancer facts
More women are surviving breast cancer than ever before, thanks to earlier detection and better treatments. But it is a common disease and the number of cases is rising.

This leaflet contains information about the things that affect the risk of developing breast cancer and how you can be breast aware. If you notice any changes in the look or feel of a breast, it is important to tell your doctor without delay.
How common is it?
Breast cancer is the most common cancer in the UK. More than 100 women are diagnosed with the disease every day. The risk of breast cancer increases with age. More than four out of five breast cancers are in women aged 50 and over. Men can also get breast cancer but it is very rare.

What is breast cancer?
The breast is made up of millions of cells. Breast cancer develops when a single cell begins to multiply out of control and forms a tumour. Some cells may break away and travel to other parts of the body, starting new tumours.

The breast consists of fatty tissue and lobules that are connected to the nipple by ducts. Breast cancer usually starts in a cell lining a duct or lobule.
What affects your risk?

Age
The risk of developing breast cancer is strongly linked to age. The older you are, the greater your chances of developing the disease.

Family history
Women with a strong family history of breast cancer have a higher risk of developing the disease themselves. Risk increases with the number of close relatives diagnosed with breast cancer. But even so, eight out of nine breast cancers occur in women without a family history of the disease.

If you have a strong family history and are worried about your risk, it is best to speak to your doctor. If appropriate, they may refer you to a breast care unit or genetics clinic.

Menstruation
Starting your periods at a younger age or having a late menopause increases the risk.

HRT
Hormone replacement therapy increases the risk of breast cancer. Your risk increases the longer you take it, and decreases gradually after you stop taking it. If you have any concerns about HRT, see your doctor.

Breastfeeding
The longer a woman breastfeeds her children, the lower her risk of breast cancer.
Having children
The more children a woman has, the lower her risk of breast cancer. Being younger when you have children also decreases your risk.

The Pill
Taking oral contraceptives slightly increases the risk, but your risk gradually returns to normal after you stop taking them.

What reduces your risk?
Healthy weight
Being overweight after the menopause increases a woman's risk of breast cancer, as body fat affects hormone levels. Try to maintain a healthy weight by combining a balanced, low fat diet with regular physical activity.

Limiting alcohol
Drinking alcohol increases the risk of breast cancer. The more you cut down on alcohol, the more you can reduce the risk of breast cancer and many other cancers.

Physical activity
Women who are physically active have a lower risk of breast cancer than less active women. Try to do at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity five times or more a week. The more active you are, the more you can reduce the risk.

Not smoking
Some recent research suggests that smoking may increase the risk of breast cancer.
Screening

Screening involves taking x-rays of the breasts (mammography). Across the UK, women aged 50 to 70 are offered screening for breast cancer every three years. In England the programme is being extended to include women aged 47 to 73. All women over 70 are entitled to breast screening, but they are not routinely invited. To make an appointment, talk to your GP or breast screening unit.

Breast screening can find cancers at an early stage when they are too small for you to notice. When changes are found early, there is an excellent chance of successful treatment. But, as well as picking up cancers that need treating, it can also pick up cancers that will not cause any problems in a woman’s lifetime. This means that some women will receive treatment they don’t need. There are benefits and risks of breast screening, and women need clear information about these to help make a decision about whether to go for screening. On balance, Cancer Research UK recommends breast screening.

Breast screening is not the only way to spot breast cancer early. It’s important that women get to know how their breasts normally look and feel, so they can spot any changes more easily. If you notice any unusual change to the size, feel or shape of your breasts, it’s worth checking with your doctor.
Early detection saves lives
Be ‘breast aware’:
• know what is normal for you
• look at and feel your breasts
• know what changes to look for
• report any changes without delay.

Your breasts may feel different depending on the time of the month and your stage of life. When you know how they normally look and feel, you will be more likely to spot any unusual changes. Check yourself in a way that is comfortable for you, perhaps in the bath or shower.

What changes should I look for?
It is often women themselves who first notice their breast cancer. Most changes are not caused by cancer, but it is very important to report anything unusual to your doctor.

Look for:
• changes in the size, shape or feel of your breasts
• a new lump or thickening in one breast or armpit
• any puckering, dimpling or redness of the skin
• changes in the position of the nipple, a rash or nipple discharge
• pain or discomfort that is new to you and felt only on one side.

If you notice any of these or any other unusual changes to your breasts, it’s worth seeing your doctor.
Further information
For more about screening and the signs and symptoms of cancer visit spotcancerearly.com

For more about cancer visit our patient information website cruik.org/cancer-help

If you want to talk in confidence about cancer, call our information nurses on freephone 0808 800 4040.

Our health messages are based on scientific evidence. Find out more at cruik.org/health

All our leaflets are thoroughly researched and based on the most up-to-date scientific evidence. They are reviewed by independent experts and updated regularly. You can order our full range of leaflets free online at cruik.org/leaflets

About Cancer Research UK
CRUK pioneers life-saving research to bring forward the day when all cancers are cured. From our volunteers and supporters to our scientists, doctors and nurses, we’re all here to save more lives and prevent, control and cure all cancers. If you would like to support our work, please call 0300 123 1861 or visit our website cruik.org