

What is breast cancer?

Breast cancer is a type of cancer that starts in the breast when a genetic change causes normal cells to grow out of control. The cancer cells usually group together to form a mass called a tumor. Most breast tumors are benign, or not cancerous, but some types of benign breast tumors might increase a woman's likelihood of developing cancer. Early detection and testing of breast lumps are important for catching cancer early, when chances for successful treatment are good.

Although breast cancer occurs almost entirely in women, men can also develop breast cancer.

What is the concern?

In the U.S., breast cancer is the second most common cancer in women after skin cancer. One in eight American women will have breast cancer at some point. In Kansas women, breast cancer is the most commonly diagnosed invasive cancer. In 2020, it is estimated there will be 2,390 new cases of breast cancer in Kansas females. However, there are steps women can take to reduce the risk of developing or dying from breast cancer.

Who is at risk?

The biggest risk factors for developing breast cancer are ones outside of our control: 1) being female, and 2) getting older. As women age, their risk of breast cancer increases. Women aged 50 to 69 have the highest risk. Other risk factors outside of personal control include a woman's genetic makeup and her family history of breast cancer.

Some risk factors are controllable. Research has shown that women can take action to reduce their risk of breast cancer. Those actions include:

Achieve and maintain a healthy weight.

Being overweight, especially in the upper body, has been shown to increase a woman's risk of breast



cancer. Losing weight may decrease risk. A large 2019 study found that women who lost weight after age 50 and kept it off had a lower risk of breast cancer than women whose weight remained stable.

Eat a diet rich in fruits, vegetables, and whole-grain foods.

Healthful, naturally occurring compounds in these foods protect against cancer at the cell level.

Get enough exercise.

Studies have shown that women who exercise four or more hours a week have a lower risk of breast cancer than less active women.

Drink little or no alcohol.

Alcohol, if consumed, should be limited to one drink per day for women. The level of risk rises as the amount of alcohol consumed rises.

Avoid or minimize post-menopausal hormone treatment.

Follow the advice of your health-care provider, but recognize possible risks of elective hormone replacement therapy.

Breastfeed.

It is not always possible for moms to breastfeed, but for those who can, breastfeeding can offer some protection against cancer for both mother and child.

Early detection saves lives.

Finding breast cancer early and getting medical treatment immediately are key strategies in preventing cancer death. Breast cancers that are found early – when they are small and haven't spread – are easier to treat successfully. Screening, the use of exams to find cancer in people without symptoms, and early detection, finding and diagnosing a disease before symptoms appear, improve the prognosis, or medical outlook, for women with this disease. A common screening test is a mammogram, or breast X-ray.

For women at average risk (those with no personal history of breast cancer, no strong family history of breast cancer, and no genetic mutation known to increase the risk of breast cancer), the following screening recommendations are made:

- Women between ages 40 and 44 should consider screening with a mammogram every year.
- Women age 45 to 54 should get a mammogram every year.
- Women 55 and older can reduce mammogram frequency to every other year, or choose to continue annual mammograms.

What about breast self-exams?

Research has not shown a clear benefit of regular physical breast exams done either by a health professional or by women themselves. However, many breast cancers are self-discovered when women notice symptoms (such as a lump or swelling, redness, or pitted skin texture) during usual activities like bathing or dressing. Know yourself. Report any change in how your breasts typically look or feel to a health-care provider right away. Early detection and treatment saves lives.

Breast cancer kills many women each year, but many more survive, thanks to continued research and advances in detection and treatment.

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