

Risk Factors

All women are at risk for developing breast cancer. However, there are certain factors that may increase your chance of getting the disease. These include:

Age: The number one risk factor for developing breast cancer is age. Risk increases as you age. Three out of four breast cancers occur in women over age 50, and the risk is highest over age 60.

Race: Breast cancer occurs more often in Caucasian women than African American or Asian women.

Personal History: If you had breast cancer, you face an increased risk of developing breast cancer in the other breast.

Genetic Inheritance: You are at greater risk if your mother, sister or daughter had breast cancer, particularly before menopause. Also, risk is higher if two or more other close relatives, such as aunts or cousins, have a history of breast cancer, especially at a young age. About five to 10 percent of women with breast cancer have a hereditary form of the disease. Some individuals of Ashkenazi (Eastern European) Jewish descent have been found to have an inherited characteristic that may increase their risk of developing breast or ovarian cancers.

Breast Changes: If you have a diagnosis of atypical hyperplasia (a cancerous condition in which cells have abnormal features and are increased in number) or lobular carcinoma in situ (abnormal cells found in the lobules of the breast), or have had two or more breast biopsies for other benign conditions, you are at increased risk for developing breast cancer.

Child-bearing Age: If you have your first child after age 30 or have no children, you are at greater risk than those having a first child at an earlier age.

Estrogen: Increased length of exposure to estrogen influences risk. This includes women who began menstrual periods at an early age, entered menopause at a late age, or women who take hormone replacement therapy for an extended period of time.

Breast Density: Cancer is more likely to occur in breasts with greater dense tissue, than in breasts with greater fatty tissue. Also, dense, glandular breasts make identifying abnormalities on a mammogram more difficult.

Radiation Therapy: If your breasts were exposed to radiation therapy before age 30, especially those treated with radiation for Hodgkin's disease, you are at increased risk for breast cancer.

Lifestyle Factors: Some studies suggest that certain lifestyle behaviors can put you at greater risk for developing breast cancer. These include alcohol consumption; lack of exercise and weight gain, particularly in postmenopausal women; and working at night under artificial lighting.

Most women who develop breast cancer have none of the risk factors listed above, other than the risk that comes with growing older.