

October breast cancer

AWARENESS MONTH

Breast Cancer Awareness Month (BCAM) is observed every October to raise awareness about breast cancer and the importance of early detection. The month also highlights the challenges faced by those affected by the disease and the need for regular check-ups.

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The benefits of breast cancer support groups

Millions of women across the globe are diagnosed with breast cancer each year. According to the World Cancer Research Fund International, breast cancer is the most commonly diagnosed cancer in women each year, with nearly three million new cases confirmed every 12 months.

Those figures are undoubtedly daunting, but they also tell a different story of perseverance and survival that can comfort women who have recently received a breast cancer diagnosis. According to the WCRF, in 2020 there were 7.8 million women worldwide who had lived for at least five years after their breast cancer diagnosis. Indeed, survival rates for breast cancer have improved dramatically in recent decades. Women often overcome the disease on account of their own personal resilience, but also by drawing on the experiences of others for inspiration and strength, namely through support groups. Women recently diagnosed with breast cancer may be surprised to learn just how beneficial support groups can be.

- Support groups can help women overcome the mental challenges of a diagnosis. A 2019 study published in the journal *Frontiers in Psychology* examined the effectiveness of support groups for women with breast cancer and their caregivers. The study found that participation in a support group can help to reduce feelings of depression, anxiety and more while also making women more capable of adapting.

- Support group participation during treatment can have a lasting effect. A longitudinal study published in the journal *Psychooncology* in 2014 found that social support of breast cancer patients was positively predictive of better physical and mental health-related quality of life at three-year follow-up appointments for breast cancer patients.

- Support groups can be informative on multiple levels. Breastcancer.org notes that participation in a support group can teach women diagnosed with the disease how to become better advocates for themselves. That's a notable benefit, as women confronting the mental health side effects of cancer treatment, including depression and anxiety, may feel as though they lack agency. In addition, by listening to others in a support group, women can identify new resources.

Support groups can be invaluable for women diagnosed with breast cancer. Women can speak with their cancer care team to learn about local support groups.

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What the different stages of breast cancer signify

Upon being diagnosed with breast cancer, women and their families are presented with a wealth of information regarding the disease. Some of that information is unique to each patient, but much of it is based on decades of research and millions of successful treatments.

The American Cancer Society reports that cancer staging is a process during which doctors will attempt to determine if a cancer has spread and, if so, how far. Breast cancer stages range from stage 0 to stage IV. Each stage signifies something different, and recognition of what each stage indicates can make it easier for women to understand their disease.

STAGE 0

The Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center notes that when a woman is diagnosed with stage 0 breast cancer, that means abnormal cells are present but have not spread to nearby tissue. The National Breast Cancer Foundation, Inc.® indicates stage 0 breast cancer is the earliest stage of the disease and is highly treatable when detected



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early. Indeed, the American Cancer Society reports a five-year survival rate of 99 percent among individuals diagnosed with stage 0 breast cancer.

STAGE I

Stage I is still considered early stage breast cancer. The MSKCC notes a stage I diagnosis indicates tumor cells have spread to normal surrounding breast tissue but are still contained in a small area. Stage I breast cancer may be characterized as stage IA, which indicates a tumor is about as large as a grape and cancer has not spread to the lymph nodes, or stage IB, which indicates the tumor may be slightly smaller but is accompanied by small clusters of cancer cells in the lymph nodes or there is no tumor and only the small clusters in the lymph nodes. The ACS also reports a 99 percent five-year survival rate for patients diagnosed with stage I breast cancer.

STAGE II

A stage II breast cancer diagnosis indicates the tumor is at least 20 millimeters (about the size of a stage IA tumor) and potentially as large as 50 millimeters. The tumor also can be larger than 50 millimeters if no lymph nodes are affected (stage IIB). The ACS notes the size of the tumor may indicate if the cancer is stage IIA or stage IIB. The MSKCC notes that a stage IIA diagnosis could indicate there is no tumor or there is a tumor up to 20 millimeters and the cancer has spread to the lymph nodes under the arm. A tumor determined to be between 20 and 50 millimeters that has not spread to the lymph nodes also indicates a stage IIA diagnosis. A stage IIB diagnosis indicates the

tumor in the breast is between 20 and 50 millimeters and has spread to between one and three nearby lymph nodes. According to Cancer Research UK, the five-year survival rate for stage II breast cancer is around 90 percent.

STAGE III

Stage III breast cancer is considered regional, which the ACS reports notes had a roughly 86 percent survival rate between 2013 and 2019. The MSKCC notes that a stage III diagnosis indicates the tumor is larger than 50 millimeters and has affected lymph nodes across a wider region than in less developed stages of the disease. Cancers that have reached stage III may be categorized as stage IIIA, stage IIIB or stage IIIC. The American College of Surgeons reports that stage IIIA indicates a tumor of any size that has spread to between four and nine lymph nodes or a tumor larger than five centimeters that has spread to between one and three lymph nodes. Stage IIIB

indicates any size tumor and that the cancer has spread to the chest wall. A stage IIIC diagnosis indicates the tumor can be any size and has spread to 10 or more lymph nodes.

STAGE IV

Stage IV is the most advanced form of breast cancer. If the cancer has reached stage IV, that indicates the tumor can be any size and has spread beyond the breast to other parts of the body, potentially including organs and tissues. The ACS reports that survival rate for this stage, which is considered distant, is 31 percent. However, the breast cancer advocacy organization Susan G. Komen notes that only around 6 percent of breast cancer diagnoses in women diagnosed for the first time have reached stage IV at the time of diagnosis.

Staging makes it easier to understand a breast cancer diagnosis. More information about breast cancer staging is available at mskcc.org and cancer.org.

Breast cancer is the most common form of non-skin-related cancer in women and the second-leading cause of women's cancer deaths in both the United States and Canada

Sources: American Cancer Society, Canadian Cancer Society

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A look at inherited breast cancer

Individuals can make various changes to their lifestyles to help reduce their chances of developing certain types of cancer, including breast cancer. One thing they cannot change is their genes, prompting curiosity about the role of family history in relation to breast cancer risk.

First-degree connection

Parents pass down many things to their children, including hair color, height, and various other traits. Parents also can pass on an increased risk for breast cancer. Cancer Research UK says some people have a higher risk of developing breast cancer than the general population simply because other members of their families have had cancer. The organization says having a mother, sister or daughter (also referred to as a first-degree relative) diagnosed with breast cancer approximately doubles a woman's risk for breast cancer. This risk grows even higher when more close relatives have breast cancer, or if a relative developed breast cancer before reaching the age of 50.

Inherited damaged genes

Johns Hopkins Medicine says



about 10 percent of breast cancers are related to inheritance of damaged genes. Several genes are associated with elevated breast cancer risk, including BRCA1 and BRCA2. Additional genes associated with an increased risk for breast cancer include PALB2, ATM, CHEK2, CDH1, STK11, PTEN, TP53, and NF1. People who have inherited a damaged gene may have a particularly high risk of developing breast cancer or other cancers, depending on the specific gene and their family history.

Getting tested

Johns Hopkins says individuals can be tested for genes that put them at risk for cancer. That is a decision that merits ample consideration, and one that should be carefully discussed with a doctor and family members. Genetic counseling can look for inherited mutations in the BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes, the two most notable for increasing breast cancer risk. A blood test is typically covered by insurance companies and analysis can take a couple of weeks. More can be learned about genetic counseling and testing at www.cancer.org.

Whether or not to get genetic testing is a personal decision. However, learning the outcome may help protect future generations. Someone with a genetic mutation has about a 50 percent chance of passing that trait on to children.

Additional risk factors

Heredity is just one risk factor for breast cancer. The American Cancer Society says White women are slightly more likely to develop breast cancer than some other races and ethnicities. Studies have found that taller women have a higher risk of breast cancer than shorter women, although the reasons for that are not exactly clear. In addition, women with dense breast tissue have a higher risk of breast cancer than women with average breast density. Women who began menstruating early (especially before age 12) have a slightly higher risk of breast cancer. That risk can be attributed to a longer exposure to the hormones estrogen and progesterone. The same can be said for women who experienced menopause later (typically after age 55).

Various factors can increase the risk of developing breast cancer, including genetic markers and family history of the disease



3 strategies that can lower breast cancer risk

Breast cancer affects millions of individuals each year. The World Cancer Research Fund International reports that breast cancer is the most commonly diagnosed cancer in women across the globe, affecting roughly 2.3 million women each year.

Despite the global prevalence of breast cancer, various organizations report high five-year survival rates, particularly among women whose cancers are detected in the earliest stages of the disease. In fact, a 2023 study published in the journal BMJ found that the risk for dying from breast cancer in the five years after an early-stage diagnosis fell to 5 percent in recent years, a notable improvement from the 14 percent risk of death that was reported in the 1990s.

Increased survival rates for breast cancer are welcome news for women and their families. The higher survival rates are a byproduct of the tireless efforts of cancer researchers, who also have discovered links between the disease and certain lifestyle factors. Though there's no way to eliminate one's risk for breast cancer entirely, the American Cancer Society notes certain variables are within women's control. With that in mind, women can consider these three strategies that can lead to improved overall health and might help women lower their risk for breast cancer as well.

1. Reach and maintain a healthy weight. The benefits of maintaining a healthy weight include a lower risk for heart disease and stroke, and women should know that weight and breast cancer risk are linked as well. According to the ACS, increased body weight and weight gain as an adult are linked to a higher

SEE PAGE D5



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More young women are getting breast cancer, report

Staff And Wire Reports

Breast cancer rates have risen by 1% annually over the past decade, with the sharpest increase in women under 50, according to a new report released by the American Cancer Society.

But breast cancer deaths have declined by 44% since 1989, preventing about 517,900 deaths, according to the report. This is largely because of improvements in treatment and earlier screening.

The American Cancer Society released its biennial update on breast cancer trends, marking the start of Breast Cancer Awareness Month.

“The encouraging news is breast cancer mortality rates continue to decrease, thanks to advances in early detection and treatment,” said Angela Giaquinto, associate scientist for cancer surveillance research at the American Cancer Society and lead author of the study. “But future progress may be thwarted by increasing incidence, especially among younger women, and consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as delayed diagnosis due to interruptions in screening.”

Massachusetts ranks 19th among U.S. states for breast cancer mortality and 22nd for incidences, about in line with national averages.

In the Bay State, about 136 out of every 100,000 people were diag-

nosed with breast cancer from 2017 to 2021, and about 16 people out of 100,000 died from breast cancer around that same period, according to the latest data.

“The data released today contributes to a growing body of evidence that the rates of breast cancer in young women are increasing, said Dr. Ann Partridge, MD founder and director of the program for young adults with breast cancer at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute.

“This trend is very concerning as breast cancer is the number one cause of cancer mortality in women under 40, where women are generally not being screened and the disease they develop is more aggressive and more difficult to treat,” she said.

Though women under 50 have a low overall risk, breast cancer has become increasingly prevalent in younger women.

“There is a slightly higher increase in the rate of breast cancer diagnosis for women who are under age 50 versus those that are above age 50,” said Karen Knudsen, chief executive officer of the American Cancer Society. “These are things we are watching to try to understand.”

Researchers also are trying to understand the racial disparities in breast cancer diagnosis and mortality. Black women have a lower survival rate for breast cancer than



white women, no matter the stage of the disease.

“Women today are a lot less likely to die from breast cancer, but alarming disparities still remain, especially for Asian American, Pacific Islander, Native American and Black women,” Dr. William Dahut, chief scientific officer at ACS, said in Tuesday’s release.

Recent research has found that several types of cancer are showing up in young people at surprising rates. In January, a study released by ACS researchers found an alarming number of colorectal cancer cases in young adults.

Dahut said in January that better screening could have some role in more cancers being diagnosed, but he said other factors, especially ris-

ing obesity rates, are likely driving the rise in cancer.

Breast cancer is the second most common cancer in women, following skin cancer.

This year, ACS estimates, there will be 310,720 new cases of invasive breast cancer diagnosed in women, and about 42,250 women will die from the disease.

Although breast cancer in men is rare, it often is diagnosed at later stages because there is no regular screening protocol. This year, 2,790 men will be diagnosed with breast cancer, and 530 men will die from the disease, according to estimates.

The ACS recommends annual screenings starting at 45 for women with normal risk factors, with the option to start screening at 40.

SIMPLE WAYS TO CUT CANCER RISK

Cancer affects people from all walks of life. According to the World Cancer Research Fund International, there were an estimated 18.1 million cancer cases around the world in 2020, and the breakdown was almost even among men (9.3 million) and women (8.8 million).

Great strides have been made in cancer research in the twenty-first century, and that has led to countless lives being saved. Cancer prevention strategies are another po-

tentially lifesaving tool in the fight against the disease. A significant percentage of cancer deaths could be prevented. In fact, the Prevent Cancer® Foundation reports that research indicates about 50 percent of cancer deaths are preventable with the knowledge individuals have today.

Perhaps the most comforting aspect of cancer prevention is that many of the strategies that can reduce instances of the disease are



simple. That means individuals won’t have to go to great lengths to include these strategies in their approach to cancer prevention.

- **Avoid tobacco.** The link between tobacco use and cancer has been known for a long time, and the good news is the message touting the importance of avoiding tobacco is working. The American Cancer Society reports that cigarette smoking rates had reached historic lows in 2019. While that’s great news, it might not tell the whole story, as consumers now have many other ways to use tobacco, each of which have been linked to cancer. So it’s not simply avoiding cigarettes, but also cigars, hookahs, chewing tobacco, vaping products, and more, that is necessary to reduce cancer risk.

- **Shield your skin from the sun.** The PCF notes that exposure to the sun’s ultraviolet rays causes the most skin cancers. The WCRFI reports that melanoma of the skin is the thirteenth most common cancer in men and the fifteenth most common cancer in women

across the globe. Protecting the skin from the sun is as simple as applying a sunscreen with a minimum sun protection factor (SPF) of 30 and covering up when spending long periods of time in the sun. The PCF urges individuals to avoid tanning beds and protect their skin year-round, including in winter.

- **Utilize fruits and vegetables** in your fight against cancer. The popularity of plant-based diets is on the rise. In fact, retail sales of plant-based foods in the United States increased by 11 percent in a single year between 2018 and 2019, according to data from the Plant Based Foods Association. A greater reliance on plant-based diets could go a long way toward reducing cancer deaths, as the PCF notes a 2021 study found that three servings of vegetables and two servings of fruit each day reduced the risk of cancer death by 10 percent.

- **Avoid excessive alcohol consumption.** The PCF notes that alcohol has been linked to cancers of the breast, liver, esophagus, and colon. When consuming alcohol, women are urged to limit their consumption to one drink or fewer each day, while men should limit their consumption to two or fewer alcoholic beverages per day. The science is simple: the more alcohol a person drinks, the greater his or her risk for cancer.

Cancer prevention is a vital component of a healthy lifestyle, and there are many simply ways people can cut their cancer risk.

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The different types of breast cancer

The term “breast cancer” does not describe a single type of cancer, but rather several forms of a disease that can develop in areas of the breast. The American Cancer Society says breast cancer type is determined by the specific cells in the breast that become cancerous. There are many different types of breast cancer, and the medical community’s understanding of the disease is based on decades of research and millions of patients treated.

In 2001, Dr. Charles Perou first classified breast cancer into subtypes based on genomic patterns. The Breast Cancer Research Foundation says breast cancer is broadly divided into two types: non-invasive breast cancers and invasive breast cancers. Non-invasive breast cancers are called Stage 0 breast cancers or carcinomas in situ. These are thought to be the precursors to breast cancer, says the BCRF. While non-invasive breast cancers are not initially life-threatening, if left untreated, they can develop into invasive breast cancers, which can be fatal.

Here is a look at some of the different types of breast cancer.



- **Invasive ductal carcinoma:** This is the most common type of breast cancer, advises the National Breast Cancer Foundation, Inc.®. Invasive ductal carcinoma accounts for 70 to 80 percent of all breast cancer diagnoses in women and men. This cancer forms in the milk ducts and spreads beyond.
- **Invasive lobular carcinoma:** This is the second most common type of breast cancer, accounting for 10 to 15 percent of diagnoses, says the BCRF. Invasive lobular carcinoma originates in

the milk-producing glands of the breast known as lobules. Tumors that form due to invasive lobular carcinoma more commonly grow in lines in the breast rather than in lumps, so they present differently on a mammogram.

- **Inflammatory breast cancer:** Inflammatory breast cancer is a rare, fast-growing type of breast cancer. The inflammatory name comes from the appearance of the skin of the breast. It looks red and inflamed, which is caused by breast cancer cells blocking lymph chan-

nels in the breast and skin, says Breast Cancer Now, a research and support charity.

- **Tripe-negative breast cancer:** The NBCF says a diagnosis of triple-negative breast cancer means the three most common types of receptors known to cause most breast cancer growths are not present in the cancer tumor. These receptors are estrogen, progesterone and the HER2/neu gene. Since the tumor cells lack necessary receptors, certain treatments like hormone therapy and drugs that target these receptors are ineffective. Chemotherapy is still an option.
- **Metastatic breast cancer:** This type of breast cancer is also known as Stage IV breast cancer. Metastatic breast cancer originates in an area of the breast, but spreads (metastasizes) to another part of the body, most commonly the bones, lungs, brain, or liver, indicates BreastCancer.org.

Individuals hoping to learn more about breast cancer should be aware that there are various types of the disease. Which type an individual has is an important variable doctors consider as they plan a course of treatment.

3 STRATEGIES FROM PAGE D3

risk of developing breast cancer. That’s particularly so among post-menopausal women. A 2023 study published in the journal BMC Women’s Health found that the chances of developing breast cancer increase among post-menopausal women who are obese.

2. Avoid a sedentary lifestyle. Exercise is one of the ways to achieve and maintain a healthy weight, so it makes sense that being physically active can reduce breast cancer risk. The National Cancer Institute reports

that a 2016 meta-analysis of 38 cohort studies found that the most physically active women had between a 12 and 21 percent lower risk for breast cancer than women who were the least physically active. The NCI also notes that additional studies have found that women who become more physically active after menopause also have a lower risk for breast cancer than those who do not.

3. Limit or eliminate alcohol consumption. The ACS urges women who drink to consume no more than one alcoholic drink per

day, noting that consumption of even small amounts of alcohol have been linked to an increased risk for breast cancer. Officials with the MD Anderson Cancer Center note that the link between alcohol consumption and breast cancer risk is low. However, the MDACC notes that alcohol can contribute to unwanted weight gain, thus increasing cancer risk. In addition, alcohol can increase levels of estrogen and other hormones associated with breast cancer.

It may be impossible to com-

pletely prevent breast cancer. However, women can embrace strategies that improve their overall health in ways that lower their risk for breast cancer.



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