



{ BREAST CANCER AWARENESS }

KNOW YOUR RISKS

Every woman shares one risk for breast cancer: being a woman. Fortunately, you have some control over other risk factors, but figuring out which ones to worry about isn't always easy. Experts break down five variables.

1 **alcohol** Research shows that just 10 grams of alcohol a day—a small glass of wine, 8 ounces of beer, or 1 ounce of hard liquor—can raise breast cancer risk. “Alcohol can increase estrogen in the blood,” says Anne McTiernan, M.D., Ph.D., cancer prevention researcher at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle. And higher amounts of estrogen are linked to an increased risk of breast cancer after menopause. **THE TAKEAWAY** This one's tricky. A small to moderate amount of alcohol is associated with better heart health, and heart disease is the No. 1 killer of women. So Robert Wesolowski, M.D., specializing in breast cancer at The Ohio State University Comprehensive Cancer Center in Columbus, doesn't put alcohol in the off-limits category. “A small amount of alcohol increases breast cancer risk to a small extent, but that's outweighed by the benefit of reducing the risk of cardiovascular disease,” he says. A good middle ground: Limit yourself to one drink or less a day, McTiernan says.

IT'S A MYTH! UNDERWIRE BRAS CAUSE CANCER

The misconception is that the underwire blocks the lymph system, leading to a buildup of toxins in your breasts. But when researchers looked at bra-wearing habits of postmenopausal women, they found that wearing a bra (with or without underwire) was NOT associated with increased risk of breast cancer.

2 soy foods

Some research suggests that soy stimulates breast cancer cell growth due to its phytoestrogens, which mimic estrogen in the body. Yet studies have found low cancer rates for women in Asian countries where they eat large amounts of soy.

THE TAKEAWAY Don't shy away from eating soy in its whole form, like organic tofu and soybeans. “Although eating soy doesn't appear to increase breast cancer risk, the potential benefit of soy remains unclear,” says Susan Brown, M.S., R.N., senior director of education and patient support for Susan G. Komen. Do avoid supplements listing soy protein isolate as an ingredient. These are usually formulated with highly concentrated phytoestrogens extracted from soy and could be problematic, Wesolowski says.

3 dense breasts

Dense breasts—those with more glandular tissue versus fat—have been associated with a higher risk of developing breast cancer, Brown says. Experts don't know why, but they do know that mammograms of women with dense breasts can be harder to interpret and may not be as sensitive in detecting tumors, Wesolowski says. **THE TAKEAWAY** If you have dense breasts (a mammogram will show this), ask your doctor if you need additional screenings, such as an ultrasound or MRI, says Jennifer Litton, M.D., associate professor of breast medical oncology at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston. Your doctor may base these recommendations on not only the density of your breasts but also other breast cancer risk factors you may have.

5 family history

Even though only about 10 percent of breast cancers are due to an inherited genetic mutation, having a mother, sister, aunt, or grandmother with the disease indicates that you have a higher risk.

THE TAKEAWAY A family history doesn't necessarily mean you have a genetic mutation, which is why BRCA1 and BRCA2 testing isn't advised across the board, Litton says. Overall, guidelines advise testing based on type of breast cancer, age of onset, other cancers in the family. A strong family history of breast or ovarian cancer means you may need an MRI and a mammogram, and screening as soon as 10 years before the earliest age of onset.

[RESEARCH-BACKED]

RISK REDUCERS

GET MOVING

Regular exercise lowers your risk by 10–20 percent, in part because it may reduce body fat and estrogen levels. Aim for at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise (like brisk walking) weekly.

STAY AT A HEALTHY WEIGHT

Being overweight can up estrogen levels and therefore risk. But a study showed losing 4–11 lb. reduced risk in postmenopausal women by 20 percent.

EAT MORE VEGGIES

Research shows women who eat a plant-based diet have a 15 percent lower risk, in part because you're eating more antioxidants.

4 the pill & hormone replacement therapy

The risk of breast cancer is increased roughly 20 percent while on birth control pills and shortly after. But 10 years after stopping, your risk is the same as if you hadn't taken them, Brown says. Note that many studies showing the correlation involved older formulations, which had higher estrogen doses.

For hormone replacement therapy, the Women's Health Initiative (WHI) study found that women on estrogen plus progestin HRT had an increased risk for breast cancer. But women on estrogen alone had a lower risk. "The higher risk may be due to the progestin, which can cause breast cells to divide and grow," says JoAnn E. Manson, M.D., Dr.P.H., one of the principal WHI investigators.

THE TAKEAWAY Unless you're at a high risk for breast cancer or have estrogen-positive breast cancer, most experts say you can take birth control pills without worry. If you're considering HRT to relieve menopausal symptoms, your doctor can help you decide if the risks outweigh the benefits. Women under 60 in menopause with moderate to severe symptoms are often candidates for HRT, Manson says. However, avoid HRT if you've had heart disease or a stroke, risk factors for heart disease, or a high risk for breast cancer.

IT'S A MYTH! DEODORANT CAUSES CANCER

People often think that substances enter the body via nicks from shaving under your arms, but studies have found no connection between these personal care products and breast cancer, Brown says. ■