

As with most cancers, in the early stages, breast cancer usually has no symptoms. As a tumour spreads, you may notice the following:

- swelling in the armpit.
- breast pain or tenderness.
- a lump in the breast.
- a noticeable flattening or indentation on the breast.
- any change in the contour, texture, or temperature of the breast
- pitted surface like the skin of an orange.
- a change in the nipple, such as dimpling, itching or burning, or ulceration or scaling.
- unusual discharge from the nipple.

Every month, the breasts change, this is associated with a woman's menstrual cycle. During this time a lump may form. While most of these are not cancerous, any lump should be examined immediately by a doctor.

Breast cancer usually begins with the development of a small, localised tumour. Some tumours are benign (meaning they do not invade other tissue), others are malignant, or cancerous. The potential for a malignant tumour to spread is a problem with all cancers.

Once such a tumour grows to a certain size, it is more likely to give off cells that spread to other parts of the body through the bloodstream and lymphatic system.

Some breast cancers grow and spread at a fast rate, others take years to spread beyond the breast.

If detected early enough, breast cancer is very treatable. Once the cancer begins to spread, getting rid of it completely is more difficult, although treatment can often control the disease for years.

Causes

Doctors are unsure what exactly causes breast cancer, but they do know of certain risk factors that increase the chances of getting the disease in certain women. (Although some women who are believed to be high risk, do not ever get it and others who are low risk do).

- advancing age
- a family history of breast cancer.
- if you have had a benign breast lump or cancer of the breast or the ovaries.
- A woman whose close relative has had breast cancer is more likely to develop the disease
- the greater a woman's exposure to the female hormone oestrogen, the more susceptible she is to breast cancer. (Oestrogen controls cell division - the more the cells divide, the more likely they are to be abnormal in some way, possibly becoming cancerous).

Oestrogen and progesterone levels rise and fall during the woman's lifetime. The age she starts and stops menstruating, the average length of her menstrual cycle, and her age at first childbirth can influence if she will develop breast cancer.

Taking hormones in the form of birth-control pills or hormone replacement therapy may also increase risk.

The diet-breast cancer link is still debated.

- Obesity is a risk factor
- Drinking alcohol regularly

Breast cancer responds to treatment best when it is detected early. In addition to having an annual medical checkup, all women should conduct monthly breast self-examinations. A mammogram is strongly recommended for women between the ages of 35 and 55.

To distinguish between benign and malignant lumps, feel the lump - a benign cyst may feel like a round, slippery bean. A tumour may feel thicker and can also cause dimpling of the skin above it. The only way to confirm cancer is to perform a biopsy and test the tissue sample for cancer cells.

In the event of malignancy, you and your doctor need to know how far along the cancer is. Various tests are used to check for the presence and likely sites of metastasis. Cancer cells need to be analysed to check for spreading or metastasis. The tests will also determine if hormone receptors are present, if so the cancer is likely to respond well to hormone therapy.

Traditional Treatments

If you have breast cancer, always research your options before rushing in and making rash treatment decisions. Ask your doctor, specialists, and people who have had the disease, as many questions as you think relevant and seek a second opinion at a major cancer treatment centre. Always work with people that you trust, and don't rush your decision. A small delay before treatment will usually do no harm.

The options for treating breast cancer depend on how the cancer itself, your age, and how healthy you are. If possible, breast cancer is treated surgically, followed usually by some combination of radiation therapy, chemotherapy, or hormone therapy.

A total mastectomy used to be the only considered treatment for breast cancer. This operation removes the breast, surrounding fat, muscle and lymph nodes.

For many women whose breast cancer is detected early and is still localised, there is another option - the removal of the cancerous lump and the lymph nodes under the arm only. Followed by appropriate radiation therapy, chemotherapy, and hormone therapy, this is proving to be just as good and is much less disfiguring.

For breast cancer that is recurrent or has metastasised, radiation therapy and chemotherapy are the usual treatments.

For further information on radiation, chemotherapy, and other treatments, see our Cancer section.

Complementary Therapies

There are, at the moment no scientifically proven method of curing cancer. Alternative measures should only be undertaken along with your traditional treatments.

Exercise

Regular aerobic exercise may prevent some forms of breast cancer developing. Studies have found that women who exercised vigorously and often were at least half as likely as more sedentary women to get breast cancer.

Relaxation

Besides pursuing meditation or yoga, many people benefit from group therapy. Relaxation techniques will usually help the patient cope better with the stress of having this disease.

Dietary Considerations

Your diet may be important in preventing breast cancer. Change your diet to include fruits, vegetables, legumes and grains. Limit your intake of fats from animals - meats, dairy products and butter.

Eat plenty of natural fibre and along with vitamins and minerals that protect against breast cancer, specifically vitamins A, C, D, and E, and calcium, selenium, and iodine. Some doctors recommend that breast cancer patients and survivors take antioxidant supplements.

Prevention

- Check your breasts once a month, have your doctor check your breasts once a year, and have mammograms annually if you are age 50 or older. Start mammograms earlier if you have a family history of breast cancer.
- Make fruits, vegetables, grains, and fish the mainstays of your diet.
- If you practice contraception, ask your doctor about the pros and cons of oestrogen-based birth-control pills.

When to seek further professional advice

- one or both breasts develop an abnormal lump or persistent pain, or look or feel abnormal or your lymph glands are swollen.