
Breast Cancer : Prevention and Treatment

This fact sheet provides basic information only. It must not take the place of medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Always talk to a healthcare professional about any health concerns you have, and before you make any changes to your diet, lifestyle or treatment.

What is breast cancer and how is it caused?

Breast cancer accounts for more than 30 per cent of all cancers in Canada. No one knows what specifically causes it. Like all cancers, breast cancer starts in the cells of your body. Normally, the cells in your body's tissues grow and reproduce themselves in a controlled manner, on orders from the genes in each cell. When these orders get mixed up, the cells grow abnormally. In time, the abnormal cells form lumps or tumours.

Can the risk of getting breast cancer be reduced ?

Yes. Staying healthy is the best way to reduce the risk. This means exercising regularly, eating a healthy, low-fat diet (lots of fruit and vegetables) and reducing the amount of alcohol you drink.

From your teen years on, it's very important to get to know your own breasts and to perform monthly, breast self-examinations.

Examining your breasts regularly is your best weapon against breast cancer. Seventy-five per cent of all breast growths, whether found to be malignant (cancerous) or benign (non-cancerous), are discovered during self-examination. You should tell your doctor about any difference in the way your breasts look or feel.

If you are age 50 or over, your doctor will probably recommend that you have a mammogram and an examination by a health professional every two years.

Early detection can make a big difference to successful treatment. It can increase a woman's survival rate by 81 per cent.

What is the treatment for breast cancer ?

No two cancers are the same, so treatment can differ from one woman to another.

Generally, if cancer is diagnosed, your doctor will refer you to a cancer centre where you will meet with an oncologist (a cancer specialist) and other healthcare professionals. Your case and medical history will be reviewed. You will have a physical examination. The oncologist will explain the treatment options that are open to you.

The type of treatment you receive will often depend on your general health or on other existing health conditions.

If your tumour is confined to your breast, generally the most appropriate treatment is surgery, when part or all of the tumour and some surrounding tissue is removed.

If a small part of the breast is removed (the tumour and some surrounding tissue) this is called a "lumpectomy" or a "partial mastectomy." If your whole breast is

removed, this is called a "simple mastectomy."

A "radical mastectomy" involves the removal of your breast and the underlying chest muscle and tissue.

If you have either a lumpectomy or a mastectomy, the lymph nodes in your underarm might also be removed to see if the cancer has spread.

Finding out that you have breast cancer can be very distressing for you, your family and your friends. Because healthcare professionals recognize that women need emotional support before, during and after treatment, they can direct you to organizations that can help you during this stressful time. You don't have to go through it alone.

When is radiation, chemotherapy or hormone therapy used ?

You and your team of healthcare professionals will together decide what treatment is best for you.

Radiation therapy often follows surgery. It is used to kill any remaining cancer cells. The side effects of radiation therapy are the result of healthy tissue being destroyed and they go away once radiation therapy is completed.

Chemotherapy is used when it's difficult to find the exact location of the tumour. If you have chemotherapy you will take one or more drugs to destroy secondary tumours, or to suppress the growth of cancer cells that might crop up in other locations. Some women experience side effects such as nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite, tiredness and hair loss. But breast cancer often responds well to chemotherapy.

Certain types of cancer, such as breast cancer, are influenced by hormones. These cancers are treated with hormones or hormone-blocking medications to slow their growth. Hormone therapy consists of a pill, or injection, which shrinks the tumour.

Where can I get more information ?

The best way to get healthy is to get informed. There are many health information sources available to you including :

Government of Ontario

For information about health services and resources :

www.health.gov.on.ca

For consumer-friendly health tips and information :

www.HealthyOntario.com

INFOline: 1-877-234-4343;

TTY: 1-800-387-5559

Telehealth Ontario:

1-866-797-0000; TTY 1-866-797-0007

Some other sources

[Cancer Care Ontario](#)

Tel : 416-971-9800

[Canadian Cancer Society – Ontario](#)

Tel :416-488-5400; 1-800-268-8874

[Ontario Breast Screening Program](#)

For Ontario women age 50 and over

Tel : 1-800-668-9304