

Black Women, Breast Cancer and Risk Factors



Breast cancer is a major health concern for black women as they are more likely than all other women to die from breast cancer. Their tumors often are found at a later, more advanced stage. So, there are fewer treatment options.

Many black women do not do monthly breast self examinations, are not getting regular physicals and breast exams, wait too late after finding a lump or breast problem. In addition, women do not know the other signs or symptoms of breast cancer and are afraid to talk and

learn more about breast cancer. Some other reasons for this may include not being able to get health care or not following-up after getting abnormal test results. Other reasons may include distrust of the health care system, the belief that mammograms are not needed, embarrassment and myths about cancer, or not having insurance. Also, research has shown that African-American women are more likely to get a form of breast cancer that spreads more quickly.

However, despite the statistics, many black women are alive and well today because of early detection and early treatment with great long term results.

Breast Cancer Information

The breast, like any other part of the body, consists of billions of microscopic cells. These cells multiply in an orderly fashion - new cells are made to replace the ones that died. In cancer, the cells multiply uncontrollably, and there are too many cells, progressively more and more than there should be. There are many types of breast conditions and diseases, but most breast lumps are not cancer.

Breast cancer is a common disease in which cells in the breast divide, grow out of control and become malignant. Tumors in the breast tend to grow slowly. By the time a lump is large enough to feel, it may have been growing for as long as 10 years. Some tumors, however, are aggressive and grow much faster.

Between 50 and 75 percent of breast cancers begin in the milk ducts, 10 to 15 percent begin in the lobules and a few begin in other breast tissues. Cancerous cells can spread to the lymph nodes and possibly to other organs of the body. They may travel early in the process when the tumor is small or later when the tumor is large.

Breast cancer is the most common invasive cancer in females worldwide. It accounts for 16% of all female cancers and 22.9% of invasive cancers in women. 18.2% of all cancer deaths worldwide, including both males and females, are from breast cancer.

More than 75% of women diagnosed with breast cancer have no risk factors.

Though the incidence of breast cancer has increased over the years, the rate of mortality has significantly decreased with early detection and treatment.

Some causes and risk factors of breast cancer

- **Gender** - Simply being a woman is the main risk factor for developing breast cancer. Men can develop breast cancer, but this disease is about 100 times more common among women than men.
- **Menstrual periods** - Women who have had more menstrual cycles because they started menstruating early (before age 12) and/or went through menopause later (after age 55) have a slightly higher risk of breast cancer. The increase in risk may be due to a longer lifetime exposure to the hormones estrogen and progesterone.
- **Getting older** - the older a woman gets, the higher is her risk of developing breast cancer; age is a risk factor. Over 80% of all female breast cancers occur among women aged 50+ years, after the menopause.
- **Genetics** - women who have a close relative who has/had breast or ovarian cancer are more likely to develop breast cancer. If two close family members develop the disease, it does not necessarily mean they shared the genes that make them more vulnerable, because breast cancer is a relatively common cancer.
- Women who carry the BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes have a considerably higher risk of developing breast and/or ovarian cancer. These genes can be inherited. TP53, another gene, is also linked to greater breast cancer risk.

Note: The majority of breast cancers are not hereditary.

- **A history of breast cancer** - women who have had breast cancer, even non-invasive cancer, are more likely to develop the disease again, compared to women who have no history of the disease.
 - **Having had certain types of breast lumps** - women who have had some types of benign (non-cancerous) [breast lumps](#) are more likely to develop cancer later on. Examples include atypical ductal hyperplasia or lobular carcinoma in situ.
 - **Dense breast tissue** - women with denser, thicker breast tissue have a greater chance of developing breast cancer.
 - **Estrogen exposure** - women who started having periods earlier or entered menopause later than usual have a higher risk of developing breast cancer. This is because their bodies have been exposed to estrogen for longer. Estrogen exposure begins when periods start, and drops dramatically during the menopause.
 - **Obesity** - post-menopausal obese and overweight women may have a higher risk of developing breast cancer. Experts say that there are higher levels of estrogen in obese menopausal women, which may be the cause of the higher risk.
 - **Late pregnancy or no pregnancy** – women who had their first full-term pregnancy after age 30 and women who never had a full-term pregnancy are at higher risk.
 - **HRT (hormone replacement therapy)** - both forms, combined and estrogen-only [HRT](#) therapies may increase a woman's risk of developing breast cancer slightly. Combined HRT causes a higher risk.
 - **Radiation exposure** - undergoing X-rays and CT scans may raise a woman's risk of developing breast cancer slightly. Scientists at the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center found that women who had been treated with radiation to the chest for a childhood cancer have a higher risk of developing breast cancer.
 - **Alcohol consumption** - the more alcohol a woman regularly drinks, the higher her risk of developing breast cancer is. The Mayo Clinic says that if a woman wants to drink, she should not exceed one alcoholic beverage per day.
- Some possible risks:

- **Height** - taller-than-average women have a slightly greater likelihood of developing breast cancer than shorter-than-average women. Experts are not sure why.
- **Certain jobs** - French researchers found that women who worked at night prior to a first pregnancy had a higher risk of eventually developing breast cancer.

(Canadian researchers found that certain jobs, especially those that bring the human body into contact with possible carcinogens and endocrine disruptors are linked to a higher risk of developing breast cancer. Examples include bar/gambling, automotive plastics manufacturing, metal-working, food canning and agriculture. They reported their findings in the November 2012 issue of Environmental Health.)

- **Cosmetic implants may undermine breast cancer survival** - women who have cosmetic breast implants and develop breast cancer may have a higher risk of dying prematurely from the disease compared to other females, researchers from Canada reported in the *BMJ (British Medical Journal)* (May 2013 issue).

Be cautious and pro-active. If you find any type of change in your breasts, chest, neck or underarms see your healthcare provider immediately; do not wait more than a month for an examination and follow-up. Early detection and early treatment are key to survival.

Sources:

- <http://www.cancer.org/>
- <http://ww5.komen.org/BreastCancer/TheBreast.html>
- <http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/37136.php>
- <http://womenshealth.gov/minority-health/african-americans/breast-cancer.html>
- http://www.bcrfcure.org/action_grantees_olopade.html
- <http://ww5.komen.org/uploadedFiles/Content/ResearchGrants/GrantPrograms/Newman%20BTS%2010-2013JM.pdf>