

Breast Cancer Facts

Breast cancer can strike all women, and some men, regardless of age or heritage. While not preventable, there are ways to detect breast cancer in its earliest stages. Through early detection it is possible to begin treatment and significantly the odds for survival.

This devastating cancer occurs in the tissues of the breast. Abnormal cells will take on abnormal growth patterns, resulting in tumors. Although breast cancer is found primarily in women, approximately one percent of those suffering from the disease are men.

Breast cancer is the most common type of cancer occurring in women. It is the second leading cause of death among women, second only to lung cancer. The American Cancer Society reported 184,200 new cases in 2000 alone, and that figure seems to increase on a yearly basis.

The female breast is a remarkable network of glands, connective fibers and fatty tissues. Breasts are comprised of a number of lobes. These lobes are divided into smaller lobules, and lead to glands where milk is produced. This network of glands, lobes and lobules lead to tiny ducts and eventually, end in the nipple.

Eighty percent of breast cancer cases occur in these ducts, a condition is known as infiltrating ductal cancer. Another ten to fifteen percent of breast cancer cases are lobular cancer, in which the disease manifests in the lobules. Inflammatory breast cancer is yet another type.

Pre-cancerous changes to the breast, known as situ, are common in women. In these situations, the altered cells have not yet spread from their initial location. When these changes occur within the ducts, the condition is known as ductal carcinoma in situ, or DCIS. When they occur in the lobules, they are called lobular carcinomas in situ, or LCIS. A routine mammogram examination can diagnose DCIS.

Metastasis cancer poses the greatest amount of risk. In this type, the cancer will spread from the place in which it began. Breast cancer most commonly metastasizes into the lymph nodes above the collarbone, or under the arms, on the same side of the body. This will compromise the lymphatic drainage system, and result in pain and swelling of the affected area. Other common sites of breast cancer metastasis are the liver, bones and brain.

Approximately fifty percent of women who develop breast cancer do not have any additional risk factors, apart from age and their gender. Age is a critical factor in breast cancer. Although the disease can strike at any stage in a woman's life, the risk of developing it does increase with age. An average 30-year old woman will usually have a 1 in 280 chance of developing breast cancer within the next ten years of her life. The probability then increases to a 1 in 70 chance as she reaches the ages of 40 to 50.

Family history is another risk factor for breast cancer. The risk is at its highest if a close relative developed breast cancer at a young age. This risk increases further if the relative is close such as a mother, aunt or sister. Recent studies have found that there may actually be a breast cancer gene that can be passed from mother to daughter.

While there may be no proven methods of preventing breast cancer entirely, there are ways to help stop the spread of the disease. Early detection is the single most important way to fight breast cancer, as it allows doctors to begin treatment immediately. Every woman must perform self-examinations as part of her regular routine. Annual checkups are crucial for all women, and those over 40 should have an annual mammogram.