

Cancer in Women

You can get cancer at any age, but it is more likely as you get older. The types of cancer people get and the risk of dying from cancer are not the same for all ethnic groups. Here are a few of the most common types of cancer in women and what you can do to help prevent them or detect the cancer early.

Lung cancer

Lung cancer is one of the most common cancers and women in the US. Most women who get lung cancer are over age 65. Lung cancer is the leading causes of death from cancer for women. Most women who die from lung cancer are or were cigarette smokers. To help protect yourself:

- If you smoke, try to quit. If you quit smoking, you are less likely to get lung cancer. Talk to your provider if you need help quitting.
- Encourage anyone you live with to quit, too. Secondhand smoke increases your risk of lung cancer.

Tell your healthcare provider if you have a cough that does not go away or a cough that brings up blood.

Screening exams for lung cancer may include a low-dose CT scan of the chest or a chest x-ray. A low-dose CT scan uses less radiation than a typical CT scan and you do not need an IV with a special dye for this test. If you are age 55 or older and you smoke, or you have smoked, ask your healthcare provider about your risks for lung cancer and if you should have a low-dose CT scan or a chest x-ray.

Breast cancer

Breast cancer is one of the most common cancers in women. Most women who get breast cancer are over age 55. Breast cancer is a treatable and curable disease if it is found early.

Women who have a family history of this cancer or who inherited a mutation (change) in the genes called BRCA1 and BRCA2 are at greater risk of getting breast cancer. You are also at greater risk for getting breast cancer if you:

- Are overweight
- Are not physically active
- Often drink a lot of alcohol
- Have taken hormone therapy with estrogen and progesterone after menopause

To help protect yourself:

- Eat a healthy diet.
- Keep a healthy weight. Women who gain 20 to 30 pounds after their teens are more likely to get breast cancer than those who don't gain this much weight. This is because fat cells make estrogen, which can help breast cancer grow.
- If you have a baby, breast-feeding can help lower your risk of breast cancer.

- Stay fit with the right kind of exercise for you. A healthy goal for most adults is to exercise for 2 hours and 30 minutes or more each week.
- If you want to drink alcohol, ask your healthcare provider how much is safe for you to drink.
- Talk to your healthcare provider about hormone replacement therapy. The female hormones estrogen and progesterone may increase your risk of breast cancer.

Tell your healthcare provider if you notice a lump or change in your breast.

Screening exams for breast cancer may include:

- A clinical breast exam by your healthcare provider every year after the age of 40.
- A mammogram as often as your healthcare provider recommends, based on your personal and family history for breast cancer. Medical organizations do not agree on how often you should have a mammogram. The US Preventive Services Task Force recommends a mammogram every 2 years for women 50 to 74 years old. The American Cancer Society recommends a mammogram every year for women 40 and older. Talk to your healthcare provider about when you should start having mammograms and how often you should have them.

Colon or rectum cancer

Colon or rectum cancer is the third most common cancer in women in the US. Colon or rectum cancer is usually diagnosed after age 50. Colon or rectum cancer is a treatable and curable disease if it is found early.

If you have a family history of this cancer or have had ulcerative colitis or other intestinal disease, you are at greater risk of getting colon or rectum cancer. You are also at greater risk for getting colon or rectum cancer if you:

- Eat a lot of red meat or processed meat, like hot dogs or luncheon meat
- Are overweight
- Are not physically active
- Have smoked for a long time
- Often drink a lot of alcohol

To help protect yourself:

- Eat a diet that is high in fiber, high in vegetables, fruits, and whole grains, and low in red meat.
- Stay fit with the right kind of exercise for you. A healthy goal for most adults is to exercise for 2 hours and 30 minutes or more each week.
- If you smoke, try to quit. Talk to your healthcare provider about ways to quit smoking.
- If you want to drink alcohol, ask your healthcare provider how much is safe for you to drink.
- Studies have not shown that dietary supplements or aspirin help protect against colon cancer.

Tell your healthcare provider if you have rectal bleeding or a change in your bowel movements, such as diarrhea, constipation, or bowel movements that are narrower than usual.

Most colon or rectum cancers start from a growth of extra tissue, called a polyp, on the inside wall of the bowel. Colon or rectum cancer grows very slowly, over 10 to 15 years. Screening exams for colon or rectum cancer include checking your bowel movements for blood or a colonoscopy. A colonoscopy is a test in which a thin, flexible tube and tiny camera is put into your rectum and up into your colon to look for polyps. A similar test called a sigmoidoscopy looks at just the lower one-third of your colon. Polyps can be removed before they turn into cancer. If you are 50 to 75 years old and have an average risk of colon cancer, you should be screened with 1 of these 3 methods:

- Have your bowel movements checked for blood once a year.
- Have a sigmoidoscopy exam every 5 years and have your bowel movements checked for blood at least every 3 years between the 5-year exams.
- Have a colonoscopy every 10 years.

If you have a parent, brother, or sister who has had polyps or cancer in the colon, especially before they were 50 years old, you may have a higher risk for polyps or cancer. In this case, your healthcare provider may want to start screening you before you are 50. You may also need to be checked more often than the regular screening guidelines recommend.

Ask your provider when and how often you should be tested for colorectal cancer.

Uterine, cervical or ovarian cancer

The uterus (womb), cervix (opening of the womb), and ovaries are part of a woman's reproductive system.

- Cancer of the uterus occurs most often in women during or after menopause. It is very rare before age 40.
- Cancer of the cervix is more common in younger women.
- Cancer of the ovary occurs mostly in women over 50.

Women with any of these cancers are more likely to recover if the cancer is diagnosed and treated early.

If you have a family history of any of these cancers, you are at greater risk of getting uterine, cervical, or ovarian cancer. Infections with the human papilloma virus (HPV) increase your risk for cervical cancer. You may also be at greater risk for getting one of these cancers if you:

- Are overweight
- Are not physically active
- Have smoked for a long time (cervical cancer)
- Take oral contraceptives for a long time (cervical cancer)
- Take estrogen alone, without progesterone, after menopause (ovarian and uterine cancer)

To help protect yourself:

- Eat a healthy diet.
- Stay fit with the right kind of exercise for you. A healthy goal for most adults is to exercise for 2 hours and 30 minutes or more each week.
- If you smoke, try to quit. Talk to your healthcare provider about ways to quit smoking.
- Talk to your healthcare provider about your risks with birth control and hormone replacement therapy.

Tell your healthcare provider if you have any vaginal discharge, unusual vaginal bleeding, bleeding after sex, or ongoing pain in your belly or back.

Screening exams for these cancers may include a pelvic exam, a Pap test, or an HPV test.

- A pelvic exam is a checkup of your reproductive system. Your healthcare provider will gently put a small tool called a speculum into your vagina to hold the vaginal walls open during the exam. Your provider will also insert his or her fingers into your vagina, and press on your lower belly to examine you.
- A Pap test may be done during a pelvic exam. Small tools are used to remove a few cells from your cervix. The cells are sent to a lab for testing. Screening for cervical cancer with a Pap test is very effective. Ovarian cancer and uterine cancer are not usually found with a Pap test.
- A human papilloma virus (HPV) test may be done as part of a Pap test to look for a virus that causes cervical cancer.

Ask your healthcare provider about your risks for uterine, cervical, or ovarian cancer and how often you should have these tests.

Skin cancer

Skin cancer is the most common type of all cancers. The 3 main types of skin cancer are:

- Basal cell cancer. Most skin cancers in the US are basal cell. It is slow growing and seldom spreads to other parts of the body.
- Squamous cell cancer. Squamous cell cancer also rarely spreads, but it is more likely to spread than basal cell cancer.
- Melanoma. Melanoma usually develops from a mole. It is also caused by too much sun. Melanoma is not as common as the other 2 types of skin cancer, but it is more serious and more likely to spread to other parts of the body.

Most basal and squamous cell skin cancers appear after age 50, but the sun's damaging effects start at an early age. Melanoma may appear at any time after puberty. Skin cancer is a treatable and curable disease. Early detection is very important.

Exposure to UV rays from sunlight or tanning beds is the most common cause of skin cancer. You may be at higher risk if:

- You have fair skin that freckles easily.
- You spend a lot of time outside.

- You live where there is more UV radiation from the sun, like at a high altitude.

To help protect yourself:

- Cover up or apply sunscreen when you are out in the sun. Try to avoid sunburns.
- Check your skin regularly and tell your healthcare provider if you have a lump or mole that changes in size, shape, or color.
- Ask your healthcare provider to check areas of skin that are hard for you to see.

For more information, contact:

- American Cancer Society, Inc.
800-227-2345
<http://www.cancer.org>
- National Cancer Institute
800-422-6237 (TTY: 800-332-8615)
<http://www.cancer.gov>

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