

Breast cancer: Are you aware of your risks?

By Julia Haskins

There's a lot of information out there about what can cause breast cancer. Instead of being overwhelmed, think about it as an opportunity for you to take control of your health. If you understand the factors that most affect your risk of breast cancer, you have a better chance of preventing it. And even if you do have risk factors, knowing what they are will help you work with your health providers to get the right preventive care.

One in 8 women will be diagnosed with breast cancer in their lifetimes. While the disease is most commonly found in women after age 70, it can occur at a much younger age. Less than 1 percent of breast cancers are found in men.

There are a number of factors that influence the risk of breast cancer, but they basically boil down to two categories: factors that you can

control to a certain degree and the factors that you have no control over. You have some control over your lifestyle choices, such as smoking or drinking alcohol. Both behaviors have been linked to breast cancer and other diseases.

But not all behaviors are harmful. In fact, some lifestyle choices may even reduce your risk of breast cancer, says Wort McCaskill-Stevens, MD, MS, chief of the Community Oncology and Prevention Trials Research Group at the National Cancer Institute's Division of Cancer Prevention.

She notes that a large amount of research shows that women who are physically active have a lower risk of breast cancer than those who don't exercise much.

The basics of good health — limiting alcohol intake, not smoking, being physically active, eating well and maintaining a healthy weight — are all behaviors that can reduce your risk of breast cancer and other diseases, says Susan Lee, MD, chief of breast surgery at Long Island Jewish Forest Hills hospital.

Instead of adopting healthy habits just to keep your breast cancer risk low, think about taking care of your body in terms of overall health and wellness. Find ways to improve your diet or get a little more exercise into your daily routine because it's good for your body.

Maintaining a healthy lifestyle is especially important because there are a number of risk factors for breast cancer that you can't control at all.

"As is the case with most cancers, it's important to note that age is the strongest risk factor for developing breast cancer," McCaskill-Stevens says. "In addition, factors like your family health history, genetics and even the density of your breasts can impact



>> For more information, visit www.cancer.gov/breast

your breast cancer risk."

There's no way for you to influence these factors. Everyone has breast cancer genes, but only some people have mutations. Depending on your racial or ethnic background, you could also be at higher risk of developing breast cancer. You also can't change your family history or how dense your breasts are. But just because there are some factors that may put you at higher risk for breast cancer doesn't mean that you will definitely develop it. Some diagnoses are a complete surprise for people who are in reasonably good health and have few risk factors for breast cancer that aren't related to lifestyle. It also doesn't mean that you should give up on your health. No matter your age or current health status, there are steps you can take to lower your breast cancer risk.

The more knowledge you have, the more power you have to improve your overall health. Learn more about your risks by talking to relatives about the history of breast cancer in your family. McCaskill-Stevens says that women should ask relatives about who has had breast cancer in their family, what type and the age when they were diagnosed.

But when it comes to sound medical advice, there's no question about where to turn first.

"The greatest step that women can take in assessing their individual risk of breast cancer is to talk with their doctor or health care professional," McCaskill-Stevens says.

Even if you don't have any concerns about breast cancer, it's always a good idea to run through your personal history, your family's history and other risk factors for breast cancer with your doctors. They can help you determine whether you need to make any lifestyle changes based on your individual health history and other information.



Pay attention to changes in your breasts

Your breasts will change over the course of your life and under certain conditions. There are many reasons why your breasts could look different than usual, according to the National Cancer Institute. You may see changes in your breasts before or during menstrual periods, during pregnancy, as you approach and after you go through menopause and when you take certain hormones. It's normal to notice some changes in your breasts during these periods, which is usually nothing to be concerned about.

But there are some telltale warning signs of breast cancer, as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention notes. Pain, discharge, redness, flakiness, lumps, an inverted nipple or irritation may indicate that something may be wrong. If you have any of these symptoms, contact your doctor right away to figure out what's going on. And even if you don't notice any changes in your breasts or body, don't skip out on your regular mammograms, which can detect breast cancer long before you see signs.

