

Your Breast Health Playbook

**9 Ways to Lower
Your Breast Cancer Risk**



BREASTCANCER • ORG

Taking care of your breast health is easier than you think.

Some of the habits that help you feel your best can also lower your risk of breast cancer.

Breast cancer is the most common cancer in women worldwide. Doctors don't know exactly what causes it, but they do know there are things that increase your risk. Some of these can't be changed — like age and genetics.

But you do have control over others, like how much you move, what you eat, and whether you drink or smoke.

Let's be clear: No one gets breast cancer because of any one thing, and a diagnosis is never anyone's fault. No one brought their diagnosis upon themselves by eating hamburgers and forgetting to exercise.

But study after study shows that small, consistent healthy choices can help you feel good while looking out for your breast health. And no, you don't need to turn your whole life upside down. Just a few small tweaks and extra steps here and there really will add up over time.

Here are a few ways to get started.

1

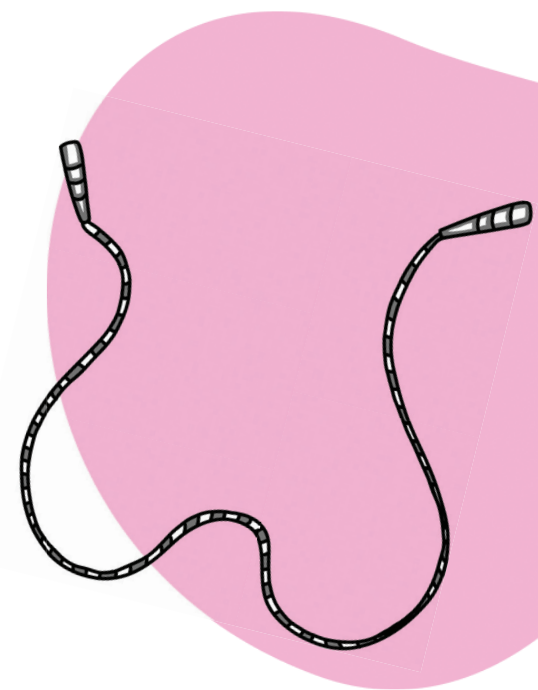
Make time to move

Let's face it, working out might not be your favorite part of the day, but being physically active lowers your risk of getting breast cancer.

You don't have time? You're not motivated? You're not alone. Almost everyone has a hard time fitting exercise into their day. The good news is that even short bursts of movement boost your health. Research shows that just three to four minutes of vigorous activity a day seems to reduce breast cancer risk.

And you don't have to do intense workouts to get the benefits, either. Gentle yoga, gardening, and walking all count!

What matters most is moving your body consistently in ways that feel doable. That'll look different for everyone, and it doesn't need to be structured or perfect.



Start small:

- Take a short walk each day.
- Take the stairs instead of the elevator when you can.
- Do a couple squats while you're making your coffee.

Working out is easier to stick with when it doesn't feel like a chore. Try out different approaches to find what you like. Do it with a friend, gamify it (How long can you balance on one leg with your eyes shut? How many times can you stand up and sit down in 30 seconds?), or try something new.

You might be surprised by what you actually enjoy!

2

Eat well

There's no one food that causes or prevents breast cancer. But what you eat does affect your risk — and your overall health.

A guideline called the New American Plate recommends eating more plant-based foods and smaller portions of lean meat. Diets higher in fiber and whole foods are linked to a lower breast cancer risk, while diets higher in ultra-processed foods and processed meats — think cheese puffs, candy, or hot dogs — are linked to a higher risk.

You don't have to give up your favorite foods. Perfection isn't the goal here. Instead, think about making simple swaps with foods that

you like — maybe chicken or fish instead of beef, or an apple instead of a doughnut. You can do this here and there, and gradually build eating habits that fit your tastes.

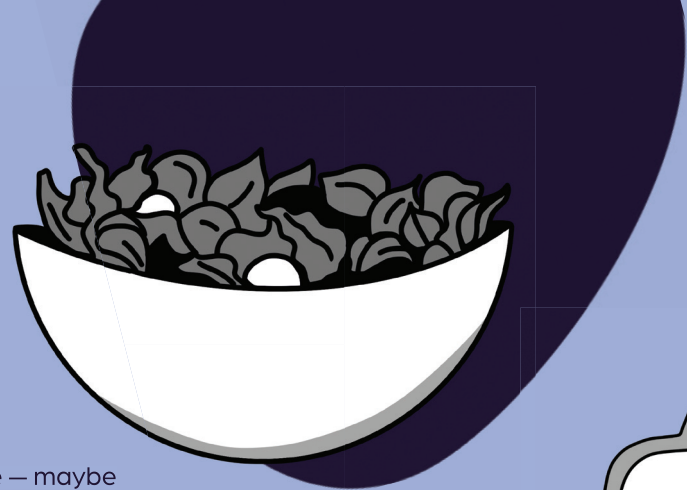
Try to:

- eat four to five servings of fruits and vegetables a day — add fruit to oatmeal, cereal, or dessert, and mix vegetables into sauces, soups, or omelets
- drink plenty of water
- include fiber-rich foods like beans and whole grains
- check food labels — you want shorter lists of recognizable ingredients

Cut back on:

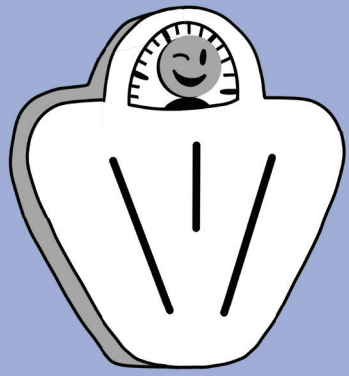
- ultra-processed foods (foods that have ingredients that aren't in your kitchen, like high-fructose corn syrup and preservatives)
- processed and red meats
- sugary drinks

When you can, try cooking more meals at home (pre-cut veggies are your friend!) and choosing healthy snacks over packaged ones. And above all, don't feel bad about that bag of chips that you couldn't resist. Some days will be healthier than others.



>>3

Maintain a healthy weight



Your weight is also part of the equation. People with excess weight or obesity have a higher risk of breast cancer, even if they exercise regularly. It matters where the extra weight is, too: Extra fat around your belly may increase risk more than the same amount around your hips or thighs.

As we all know, losing weight can be hard, especially as you get older. Small adjustments and extra steps here and there can make a difference, like moving more throughout the day, choosing more whole foods, and being more intentional about what you snack on. Talking with your doctor can also help you set a healthy, realistic goal

and create a plan that works for you.

Apps and online tools can help here. You can use them to track your eating and activity habits, analyze your food, and figure out how much of a given food you should eat per day. They can also help you connect the dots between what you eat and how you feel. Once you start noticing how different choices affect your energy and how you feel throughout the day, it can become easier to stick with habits that support your health.

Before long, these small shifts can start to feel less like effort and more like something that feels natural to you.

MYTH

or

FACT?

Breast cancer only happens to middle-aged and older women.

MYTH!

Men (including trans men who have had top surgery), women of all ages, and nonbinary people can all get breast cancer. Risk does increase with age, it's true, but young women aren't immune. One in every 25 breast cancer cases are in women under age 40.

4 *mmh*

Drink and smoke less (or not at all)

We get it — alcohol's such a big part of our culture. Raising a glass is how we celebrate, unwind, and connect. Cutting back can feel like a buzzkill.

But the hard truth is that alcohol increases your breast cancer risk.

It doesn't matter if it's wine, beer, or liquor, but *how much* you drink does matter. The more you drink, the higher the risk. And binge drinking, even occasionally, seems to increase risk even more.

Drinking small amounts doesn't put you in the clear, though. Newer research suggests there may not be

a truly safe amount when it comes to breast cancer risk.

If you don't want to give it up completely, consider cutting back. You might be surprised by how good you feel and how supportive your friends are. They may even join you!

Try to:

- limit alcohol consumption to no more than 3 drinks per week
- choose non-alcoholic options
- plan alcohol-free days during the week



Smoking also raises breast cancer risk and is linked to a long list of other serious health issues, including many cancers. It can even make hot flashes worse! If you smoke, quitting — and even cutting back — can make a real difference over time.

It might help to:

- use nicotine patches, gum, or medication
- join a quit program or call a support line
- lean on a friend to hold you accountable

5

Find out your personal risk

We can't say it enough: Everyone with breast tissue (that's you too, guys!) has some level of breast cancer risk. There are lots of things that affect your personal risk, like your age, lifestyle, and genetics, so everyone's risk is different.

It's a good idea to learn what your personal risk is so that you and your doctor can create a screening plan that makes sense for you. Risk also changes over time, so it's important to reassess every few years.

According to the American College of Radiology, all women should have a breast cancer risk assessment by age 25. This way, you know if you need earlier or more frequent screening. Older than 25? It's never too late to get a risk assessment, even if you're already getting regular mammograms.

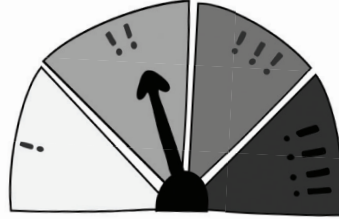
Start by asking your primary care doctor, gynecologist, or a

provider at a breast or genetics clinic to do the assessment. Your doctor may not be thinking about breast cancer, especially if you're young, so you may need to bring it up yourself.

To get the most out of that conversation, come with some information on your family history and a few questions to get things started, like:

- What's my risk of developing breast cancer?
- Do I need a formal risk assessment?
- When should I start getting mammograms — and how often should I have them?
- Do I need other types of screening (ultrasound, MRI) based on my risk?

This can help you make more informed decisions about your next steps.



Breast Cancer Risk Isn't Created Equal

Breast cancer affects all types of people, but it tends to hit some groups harder than others.

White women are slightly more likely to develop breast cancer than Black, Hispanic, and Asian women. But Black women are more likely to be diagnosed with more aggressive forms of breast cancer at younger ages. They're also more likely to die from the disease. Not having access to affordable, high-quality screening and care may play a role here.

People who don't have health insurance also tend to get less breast cancer screening, and they get diagnoses at later stages, when the cancer is harder to treat.

And there's still a lot we don't know about breast cancer risk for people who are LGBTQ+, but they seem to have a higher breast cancer risk. The lack of research, clear screening guidelines, and inclusive care leave many in the LGBTQ+ community feeling isolated and unsure about where to get screening and support.

All of this makes it even more important to know your personal risk and advocate for your health. If you can, find a doctor who makes you feel heard and who understands your specific needs. You may need to be proactive: ask questions, bring up concerns, and make sure your screening plan reflects your personal risk.

Learn your family history

Knowing a bit about your family's medical history is key to understanding your own risk level.

If you have close relatives who've been diagnosed with breast cancer, you may be at a higher risk of developing the disease. In some cases, a strong family history of breast cancer is linked to having a gene mutation that raises breast cancer risk.

If you can, pull together a list of relatives who have a history of cancer. What kind of cancer did they have? At what age? The more information your doctor has, the easier it is for them to decide whether or not to recommend genetic testing for you.

This may be easier said than done, though. Learning about your family history requires

cooperation from your family members, and some may not feel comfortable sharing medical information or talking openly about cancer. Or they might just not have all the details.

Gather the information you can, but don't worry if there are gaps. Genetic testing may still make sense for you, even if you don't have as complete a picture as you'd like.



What's the Deal With Online Risk Calculators?

Breast cancer risk calculators, which are free to use online, estimate your risk using information like your health and family history. They're convenient and can be a helpful way to start the conversation about your risk level.

But they're not always accurate, so it's important to go over your results with a healthcare provider. They can help you interpret them and decide what they mean for your screening plan.

MYTH or FACT?

MYTH
If I don't have a family history of breast cancer, I won't get it.

MYTH!
Most breast cancer cases are not hereditary. If you do have a strong family history, though, make sure to tell your doctor.

Speak up for your health

Advocating for yourself can be hard, especially if your doctor is dismissing your questions and telling you that you don't have anything to worry about. And if you don't have access to good, inclusive care, it can be even harder to feel heard and taken seriously.

But speaking up and being persistent are so important for your health. That might mean asking questions, doing your own research,

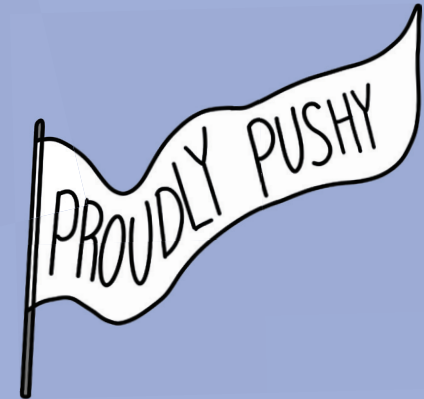
or calling it out when something doesn't feel right. It might mean feeling like you're difficult. *Don't be afraid to be difficult.*

If you're not getting clear answers or your concerns aren't being taken seriously, keep asking or get a second opinion. It can feel awkward, but it's a very normal part of care. A doctor who puts your health first will support you in getting the information you need.

Tips for talking to your doctor:

- Keep track of any changes in how your breasts and chest area look or feel, including when the changes started and if they get worse.
- Write down your questions before your appointment.
- Repeat back what your doctor says to make sure you understand.
- Ask for an explanation if you don't understand something (and ask again if it still isn't clear!).

If something feels off, keep bringing it up until you feel like your concerns are being taken seriously.



- Ask if you can record the conversation so you can listen to it again later.
- Bring someone to the appointment to help ask questions, take notes, and support you.

Most importantly, don't ignore your concerns or brush them aside. If something feels off, keep bringing it up until you feel like your concerns are being taken seriously. Your health might depend on it!

MYTH or FACT?

Chemicals in our air, water, and food can raise our risk of breast cancer.

FACT!

More and more research is showing a link between certain chemicals and breast cancer risk.

But you can lower your exposure, starting at home: Clean your drinking water with a filter that uses reverse osmosis or carbon filters. To reduce indoor air pollution, use a HEPA filter air purifier and leave your shoes at the door.

8

Know your breasts – no matter your sex

Knowing how your breasts and chest area feel can help you find breast cancer early, when it's easier to treat. This is true if you're a woman, man, or nonbinary.

A breast self-exam means checking your breasts, by sight and by touch, for any changes — that could mean a lump or it could mean anything that feels new or different. About 25% of breast cancers are found this way.

When you regularly check your breasts and chest, you become familiar with how your breasts normally look and feel. Knowing

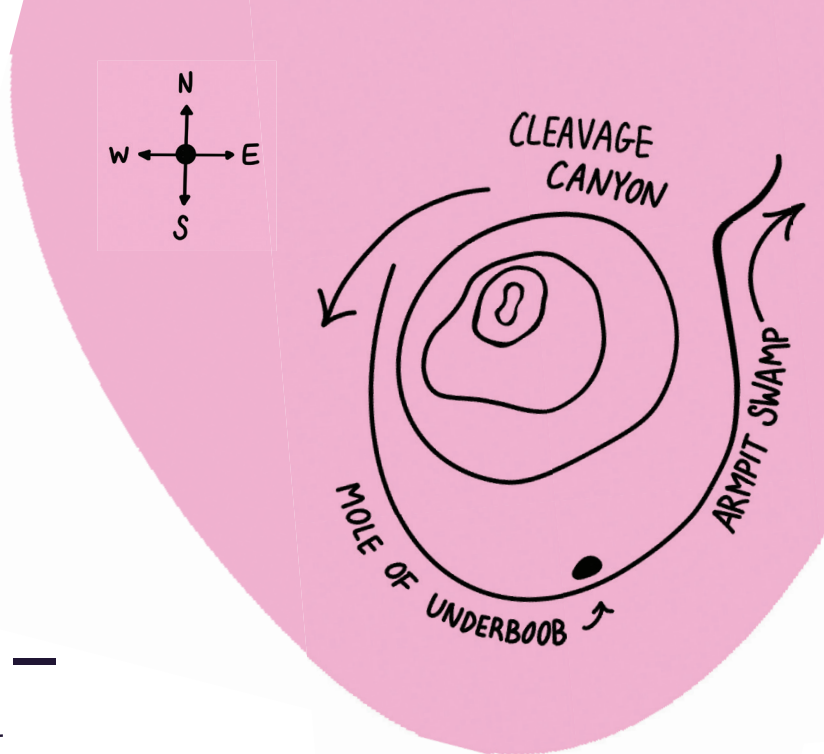
your body's baseline helps you notice any changes early. Keep in mind that breast self-exams aren't a substitute for regular mammograms and exams by your doctor. Some breast cancers can't be found by breast self-exams because they're too small.

You can check your breasts in whatever way feels natural to you. Some people like a structured, step-by-step approach, while others do the check regularly in the shower or when getting dressed. The most important thing is to make it a habit.

Pro tips:

- Look at your breasts and chest area in the mirror for any visible changes.
- Feel your breast and chest tissue using a consistent pattern so you cover the whole area.
- Check when lying down and then again while standing.
- Pay attention to changes like lumps, skin dimpling, nipple changes, or swelling.

If you notice something new or unusual that doesn't go away, talk to your doctor.



Do you need genetic testing?

If you've had cancer before or there's a history of cancer in your family, you may want to consider genetic testing. Mutations in certain genes are linked to a higher risk of breast cancer. Genetic testing can tell you if you have any of these.

About 5% to 10% of breast cancer cases are hereditary, meaning they're caused by a genetic mutation inherited from a parent. *BRCA1* and *BRCA2* mutations are the most well-known mutations linked to breast cancer.

Genetic test results can't tell you if you'll get breast cancer, but they can help you and your doctor understand your risk and talk about what you can do to lower it.

If you're considering genetic testing, completing a breast cancer risk assessment with your doctor is a good place to start. Based on your risk assessment, personal and family history, and other risk factors, your doctor or a genetic counselor may suggest testing.

Don't forget your mammograms

Mammograms are such an important tool in catching breast cancer early, often before symptoms appear, when it's easier to treat. And yet, it can be so hard to know — and remember! — when to get them.

Many experts recommend that women who are at average risk of breast cancer get screening mammograms every year starting at age 40.

It's not one-size-fits-all, though. Your screening plan is based on your personal risk, so you want to create that plan with your doctor. If you have a higher risk because you have dense breasts, a strong family history, or genetic mutations linked to the disease, you may need to start screening earlier, get it more often, or have extra imaging like ultrasound or MRI.

If you have dense breasts — about 50% of women do — it means that your breast tissue may camouflage cancer on a mammogram image. In that case, it's worth asking your doctor if you should get other imaging with your mammogram.



Mammograms aren't comfortable, so it can be easy to put them off. But the exam itself is quick, and so important for finding cancer early. There are also ways to make the experience more manageable, like scheduling your appointment when your breasts are less tender.

Try to:

- talk to your doctor about your personal risk and screening plan
- schedule your mammograms regularly, starting at age 40 (or earlier if recommended)
- ask if you have dense breast tissue and whether you need additional imaging
- set reminders to keep up with screenings, even if you feel fine

MYTH or FACT?

Mammogram radiation causes breast cancer.

MYTH!

The benefits of mammograms outweigh the risks — by a lot.

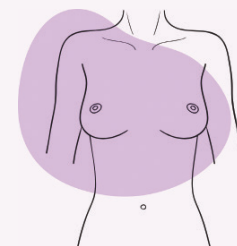
Mammograms use very low doses of radiation — about the same amount that you're exposed to naturally (from the sun, minerals in the ground) over the course of a few weeks.

One study found that if you got a mammogram every year from ages 40 to 49 you'd get breast cancer on average once every 76,000 to 97,000 years! The cancer risk from the radiation is just that low.



How to Do a Breast Self-Exam

Look at your breasts in the mirror with your hands on your hips.



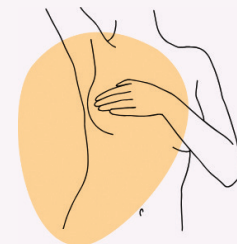
Raise your arms and look for any changes in size, shape, or color.



Look for any signs of fluid coming from one or both nipples.

Feel your breasts while lying down using a circular motion about the size of a quarter.

Use the same motion to feel your breasts while standing or sitting.



Call your doctor if you notice a lump or have other symptoms.



Learn more
at [Breastcancer.org](https://www.breastcancer.org)





The Power of 3

Being proactive about your breast health doesn't have to feel overwhelming. One easy way to stay on track is to follow the Power of 3:

1

Monthly self-check:

Check your breasts regularly so you know what's normal for your body and can notice any changes.

2

Annual clinical exam:

Have your doctor or nurse practitioner check your breasts during your yearly check-up.

3

Annual mammogram:

Get regular mammograms starting at age 40 (or earlier if recommended for you based on your risk) to find changes too small to be felt.

Together, these habits create a simple routine that can help you catch changes early and stay on top of your health.

Your breast health game plan

There's no way to completely eliminate your risk of breast cancer, but these tips can help you lower it. And just as importantly, they'll help you feel good.

After all, breast health is good health. Eating good foods, fitting movement into your day, and staying on top of your regular check-ups has benefits in the here and now. A healthy lifestyle can improve your sleep, give you more energy, and even make you happier.

The most important thing is to do what feels manageable. You don't have to overhaul your life. Start with one or two small changes that interest you, and go from there. Some days will be easier than others, and that's OK.

Focusing on progress over perfection is the real win.

We're in your corner.

Breastcancer.org is here for you every step of the way — with real talk, real science, and real community support you can count on. Think of us as your ultimate teammate.

We know that the earlier you start protecting your breast health, the better your chances of never needing us for anything more than information. That's exactly why we're here — sharing practical, evidence-based guidance on nutrition, exercise, sleep, and stress so you can build habits that lower your risk before a diagnosis ever enters the picture.

The best time to start is now. And we'll be right here with you.



If you or someone you love is at high risk or has been diagnosed with breast cancer, we can help.



Find out more about ways to get involved and make a donation in support of someone with breast cancer.

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Breastcancer.org is a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, founded by Dr. Marisa C. Weiss, a breast oncologist and breast cancer survivor.