

Lifestyle Factors that Can Help Reduce Cancer Risk

From the Breast Cancer Options 2021 Healthy Lifestyles Calendar

Only about 5-10% of breast cancers are due to heredity. Known risk factors bring the total to 25-40%. *The reasons for the other 60-75% are unclear and they may be due to environmental exposures and other preventable factors.* Most people are born with normal genes. So what causes cancer in a healthy person?

Most gene mutations occur after you're born and aren't inherited. Gene mutations can be caused by smoking, radiation, viruses, **cancer**-causing chemicals, obesity, hormones, chronic inflammation and lack of exercise. The 5-year survival rate for breast cancer is 90%. Lifestyle changes may reduce the risk of recurrence.

Be Physically Active: Exercise is as close to a silver bullet for good health as there is, and women who are physically active for at least 30 minutes a day have a lower risk of breast cancer. Regular exercise is also one of the best ways to help keep weight in check. It also lowers the levels of both IGF-1 and circulating estrogen levels in our blood (even if the exercise does not lead to a healthy weight). Studies show that exercising 2-3 hours per week can reduce breast cancer risk by 30%; 4 or more hours by 50%.

Keep Your Weight in Check: Maintaining a healthy weight is an important goal for everyone. Being overweight can increase the risk of many different cancers, including breast cancer, especially after menopause. Weight gain after age 18 is associated with a 45% increase in breast cancer risk and higher rates of breast cancer recurrence and mortality in both premenopausal and postmenopausal breast cancer patients. The more body fat a woman has, the more estrogen will be circulating. 80% of all breast cancers are fueled by estrogen.

Eat a Healthy Plant-Based Diet: Studies link a plant-based diet to a lower risk of breast cancer. Many vegetables contain cancer-fighting antioxidants and phytochemicals. Cruciferous vegetables, like broccoli, cabbage and cauliflower, contain sulforaphane, a substance that has been shown to reduce tumor size by more than 50%. Fruits contain antioxidants and other phytochemicals, which can help reduce cancer risk. Following a healthy plant-based diet, could prevent 30–50% of all cancers **and strengthen the chance of survival after diagnosis.**

Don't Smoke: Smokers and non-smokers alike know how unhealthy smoking is. It lowers quality of life and increases the risk of heart disease, stroke, and at least 15 different cancers – including breast cancer. It also causes, bad teeth and wrinkles.

Don't Drink Alcohol: Alcohol interferes with estrogen pathways influencing hormone levels and effects on the estrogen receptors and disrupting absorption of folic acid, a B vitamin needed for production and repair of DNA. It increases estrogen levels in the body and increases the risk of estrogen sensitive cancers. Beyond the estrogen connection, there is evidence that alcohol itself is carcinogenic. Having three or more drinks daily raised the risk of ER+/PR+ tumors by 51%. If you can, avoid drinking alcohol altogether.

Sleep: A required activity, not an option! Lack of sleep increases inflammation in the body. Sleep gives the body time to recover and repair mentally and physically. Try to get 7–9 hours nightly to function optimally. The normal sleep-wake cycle (circadian rhythm), is important for the production of melatonin, a tumor-fighting hormone, and requires a balance of daylight and darkness. Melatonin acts like an anti-estrogen, reducing the number of estrogen receptors on breast cancer cells. However, light at night disrupts melatonin production. Sleep disturbances reduce Natural Killer cell activity — part of the body's defense mechanism against viruses, bacteria, even cancer — and can impact the body's natural immunity. Melatonin interferes with the way that estrogen promotes cancer growth and inhibits it. It helps women who have failed to respond to Tamoxifen improve their response to the drug.

Lower Stress Levels: Studies show that stress contributes to an increase in cancer by modifying cell responses to environmental factors. It affects the immune system lowering Natural Killers Cells and T-lymphocytes -- white blood cells that are key to immune response. Studies show that feelings of happiness and optimism can play a protective role against the disease and influence the interaction between the central nerve, endocrine, and immune systems. Learn to let go of what you cannot control and find the support you need.

Managing stress, adopting healthy eating and exercise habits, getting a good night's sleep, and finding good emotional and social support, should be regarded as much a part of cancer treatment as chemotherapy or radiation.