

# TEN HIGHLY PERSISTENT MISTAKEN BELIEFS ABOUT BREAST CANCER

Cancer is caused by many factors. Years of research based on huge numbers of people have helped get a clearer picture of what increases or decreases our risk. There is a ton of awareness about breast cancer, but there are still many mistaken beliefs that cause women more anxiety than necessary.

## 1. Women have a 1-in-8 chance at any age of getting breast cancer.

**Reality:** Most people think they have a higher risk of breast cancer than they actually do. Estimates are that a woman age 20 has a 1 in 2,000 risk of developing breast cancer in the next 10 years; at age 40, 1 in 100; age 60, 1 in 28; age 85, 1 in 8. About 50% of breast cancer occurs among women age 62 or older.

## 2. I'm too young to worry about breast cancer.

**Reality:** You're never too young to get breast cancer. While a breast lump or mass in a younger woman is much less likely to be cancer than a lump in an older woman, it could be cancer and needs to be checked out. 25% of women with breast cancer are younger than 50, with a few as young as late teens.

## 3. Needle biopsies can disturb cancer cells and cause them to spread to other parts of the body.

**Reality:** There's no conclusive evidence for this claim. Despite some previous concerns, studies have found no increased spread of cancer among patients undergoing needle biopsies compared to those who did not. If the disease spreads, it's not because of the biopsy.

## 4. If I'm diagnosed with breast cancer, I must have surgery immediately.

**Fact:** Although it's understandable that a woman would want immediate treatment, most of the time it's safer to take a little time to get a second opinion, and make sure you have the right information about the type of treatment that is best for you.

## 5. Having a mastectomy to treat breast cancer is more likely to increase a woman's life expectancy than having a lumpectomy.

**Fact:** The life expectancy and survival rates are the same for most breast cancers whether a woman is treated with a lumpectomy or a mastectomy. It's true that there is a small risk that breast cancer may return after a lumpectomy with radiation. However, in those cases, a woman who goes on to have a mastectomy has the same survival rate and life expectancy as a woman who had a mastectomy after initial diagnosis.

## 6. Most women with breast cancer have a family history of the disease.

**Fact:** About 80% of women with the disease **don't** have a family history and most women with a family history of breast cancer will never get it. Only women who have *close* blood relatives with breast cancer have a higher risk of the disease than the general population. Having a first-degree relative (mother, sister or daughter) with breast cancer almost doubles a woman's risk. Having two first-degree relatives increases her risk about threefold. Women with a father or brother who have had breast cancer also have a higher risk of breast cancer.

## 7. A diagnosis of breast cancer means I'm going to die.

**Reality:** The number of women surviving at least 10 years after proper treatment is 85-90%. Breast cancer that has metastasized, or spread to other parts of the body, poses the greatest challenge, although women with metastatic breast cancer often live for years with their disease.

## 8. If your mammogram is negative, there is nothing to worry about.

**Reality:** Mammograms fail to detect as much as 20% of breast cancer in women over 50, and as much as 40% in younger women. Younger women at high risk should talk with their doctor about the benefits and limitations of starting mammograms when they are younger and learn about other technologies. Clinical breast exams and knowing what is normal for your breast are also crucial pieces of the screening process.

**9. After I've survived 5 years, my breast cancer won't return.**

**Reality:** Breast cancer can recur at any time, although 75% of recurrences occur within five years. 25% can recur any time after five years.

**10. Small-breasted women are less likely to get breast cancer.**

**Reality:** There's no connection between the size of your breasts and your risk of getting breast cancer. Recommendations for routine screenings and checkups are the same regardless of breast size.