

Managing your breast cancer risk: Lifestyle factors



If you have been told by your doctor that you are at high risk of breast cancer, you are probably wondering if there is anything you can do to reduce your risk.

This information sheet tells you about lifestyle factors that may affect your risk. It is based on current scientific evidence. Other sheets in this series tell you about screening methods and prevention strategies.

This information is for women who are at high risk because they have:

- a strong family history of breast and/or ovarian cancer, and/or
- a change in a gene that normally protects against breast/ovarian cancer (see: gene change).

What is a lifestyle factor?

These are things in your life that you may be able to modify to reduce your risk.

How much do lifestyle factors affect my risk?

Unfortunately, we don't know as much as we would like to about these factors. It is likely that their effect on your risk is moderate in degree. More research needs to be done but we can still make reasonable recommendations on the basis of current evidence. Often modifying lifestyle factors can reduce the risk of other diseases and improve your general health too.

Which lifestyle changes could I consider?

Exercise

There appears to be an association between a lifestyle that includes little exercise and an increased risk of

breast cancer, as well as a poorer outcome after breast cancer diagnosis.

Regular exercise together with maintaining a healthy weight – including during childhood and adolescence – is known to considerably reduce the risk of breast cancer.

Diet and vitamins

Obesity – especially in postmenopausal women – is considered to increase the risk of breast cancer. So try to keep your weight within the normal range.

A diet low in fat and high in fresh fruit and vegetables will help you keep to your ideal body weight. It may also help protect against breast and other cancers. In particular, a diet high in polyunsaturated (vegetable and fish) or monounsaturated (vegetable) fats may be protective of many cancers; however, a high saturated (animal) fat diet may increase the risk of breast and other cancers.

Dairy foods contain calcium and vitamin D, which are important especially for keeping your bones strong. No studies have shown that dairy foods specifically increase the risk of breast cancer; however, they do contain a certain amount of fat. So include lower-fat types of dairy products (or other calcium-supplemented food) in your diet.

Alcohol

In the general population, there is convincing evidence that alcohol use increases the risk of breast cancer. The level of risk increases in line with the level of consumption. In women with a **family history** of breast cancer there may be an even greater risk. Cancer Council recommends that people avoid drinking alcohol

altogether. For those who choose to drink alcohol, Cancer Council recommends they drink only within the current Australian guidelines of no more than two standard drinks per day.

Oral contraceptive pill ('the Pill')

Studies of the use of the Pill in women at **high risk** of breast cancer are limited and generally have inconclusive results. A review of studies investigating the link between the use of the Pill and breast cancer risk in women with a strong family history of breast cancer concluded that there is no increased risk. However, some groups of women, such as those who took the Pill prior to 1975, may be at increased risk.

For many women at **high risk**, the Pill is an effective and convenient form of contraception. Its use by high risk women for other conditions such as acne or period pain is more controversial. Talk to your doctor about the benefits and risks of using the Pill.

Hormone replacement therapy (HRT)

Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) is used for managing **menopause** symptoms.

HRT has been **associated with** a small increased risk of breast cancer, particularly if it is used for more than five years. However, if menopause symptoms are severe and a woman's quality of life is greatly affected, HRT may be prescribed for short periods, even to women with an increased risk of breast cancer.

Because of the increase in breast cancer risk, HRT in high risk women must be monitored carefully and be used for as short a time as possible. Women who have had their ovaries removed at an early age may be advised to use HRT for a longer period of time.

Childbearing and breastfeeding

In women at **average risk**, having at least one full-term pregnancy before age 30 and

breastfeeding for more than one year is associated with a decreased risk of breast cancer. To date, studies in women at high risk are inconclusive. Breastfeeding *may* reduce risk in the high-risk population, but early age at first childbirth *may* increase risk. With this in mind, breastfeeding your baby for as long as possible is encouraged and no recommendations can be made about the 'best' age to have a baby.

What that word means

associated with This expression is used in science to mean that there is scientific evidence to show that in the presence of one factor (for example, a change in a certain gene), another factor (for example, breast cancer) is more likely to occur.

average risk This means that someone's chance of developing a disease is no higher or lower than average. Also known as *population risk*.

family history A careful assessment by a Family Cancer Centre of cancer occurrences in a family.

gene change A change somewhere in a gene. A change may be inherited from either parent or be caused by an error while a cell is reproducing itself, by factors such as some chemicals or viruses, or by events that science is yet to discover. A change in a gene may lead to disease such as cancer. However, people who inherit a change in a gene that may predispose to cancer don't always get cancer. Also known as a *gene error* or *gene mutation*.

high risk This means that someone's chance of developing a disease in the future is higher than average, due to a family history of the disease and/or a change in a gene known to predispose to that disease. People assessed as at high risk are advised to consider strategies that could reduce their risk.

hormone replacement therapy (HRT) Drug therapy that supplies the body with hormones which it is no longer able to produce; it is used to relieve symptoms of menopause.

menopause The time in a woman's life when the ovaries stop producing oestrogen and monthly periods stop. The woman is no longer able to conceive children. Menopause can also be caused by the removal of the ovaries and sometimes chemotherapy.

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