

Breast cancer: Recommended lifestyle changes



Like many other cancers, you may have risk factors that are beyond the control of lifestyle changes. For example, if you have a family history of breast cancer or there is a strong indication that you may have inherited mutated BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes, you may be at high risk for getting breast cancer.¹

The BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes are actually good genes in your body that produce proteins to help stabilize your cell's genetic material. If either of these genes mutate, however, you may actually be at greater risk for breast cancer.¹ These mutations are relatively rare, so discuss this risk factor with your healthcare provider before requesting mutation testing.¹

The following are recommendations on lifestyle changes that can lower your risk of breast cancer:²

- Try to maintain a healthy weight (maintaining a consistent weight is better for you than a cycle of gaining and losing weight).
- Exercise regularly (at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic exercise or 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity aerobic exercise each week, preferably spread throughout the week).
- Try to get adequate sleep at night.
- Don't drink alcohol or limit alcoholic drinks to no more than one per day.
- Avoid exposure to chemicals that are known carcinogens (cancer-causing chemicals).
- Limit exposure to any medical imaging tests that use radiation if not medically necessary.
- Ask your healthcare provider about the risks and benefits of hormone replacement therapy or oral contraceptives (birth control pills).
- Ask your healthcare provider about possible benefits of breastfeeding in preventing cancer.
- Don't smoke.

Let's talk a little more about the role of exercise and maintaining a healthy weight.³ Women need the hormone known as estrogen. Our bodies produce it naturally, but estrogen can stimulate cell overgrowth and result in a type of breast cancer associated with estrogen production.³

Before menopause, your ovaries produce most of your estrogen.³ After menopause, most of your estrogen comes from fat tissue.³ So keeping your body fat content down (with a combination of healthy eating and exercise) reduces the production of estrogen.³

When you exercise, you also improve the ratio of “good” estrogen to “bad” estrogen by about 25 percent.³

The American Heart Association recommends 150 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise weekly—or 30 minutes of exercise five days a week.⁴ If this sounds familiar, it's because this consistency and intensity is also recommended for preventing or managing other diseases, like Type 2 diabetes and heart disease.

1. <https://www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org/uspstf/recommendation/brca-related-cancer-risk-assessment-genetic-counseling-and-genetic-testing>, August 2019
2. https://www.cdc.gov/cancer/breast/basic_info/prevention.htm, September 2020
3. <https://www.prevention.com/health/how-to-prevent-breast-cancer/slide/3>, July 2018
4. http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/HealthyLiving/PhysicalActivity/FitnessBasics/American-Heart-Association-Recommendations-for-Physical-Activity-in-Adults_UCM_307976_Article.jsp#.WjR0ZIWnHIU, April 2018

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