



## *Breast Cancer Awareness and Prevention - From the desk of Susanne Richards, CRNP; Cancer Prevention Coordinator*

**How can I reduce my chances of developing breast cancer?** It's a given that some of the most significant influences in the development of breast cancer are out of our control. Factors - family, history and age cannot be avoided or ignored. Nevertheless, there are choices and options that may help to significantly lower a woman's likelihood of developing breast cancer. Women who have children before age 30 have shown a lower probability of developing breast cancer as do women who breastfeed. Women who regularly exercise, maintain a healthy diet, get plenty of sleep and generally stay in good physical shape are less likely to develop breast cancer. Exposure to chemicals that are known to cause cancer, excessive exposure to radiation (X-rays, PET scans, mammograms) and long-term hormone replacement therapy have all been proven to contributing factors to the development of breast cancer and should be avoided, when possible.

If there is a family history of breast cancer, there are options and choices to reduce your risk. As with all options, these should be discussed with your doctor. Some of these options include genetic screening for gene mutations associated with breast cancer such as BRCA1 and BRCA2, as well as formal risk assessment calculations to get a better sense of your personal lifetime risk of breast cancer. Some women at high risk may opt to take supplements or medications that will decrease estrogen levels and can reduce the risk by as much as 50%. Women at extremely high risk may choose to have surgery, such as a preventative mastectomy or removal of the ovaries and fallopian tubes, which has been proven to lower the risk of breast cancer.

**What's the best way to manage my risk?** Early detection remains the best defense against breast cancer. The earlier that breast cancer is discovered, the more likely that it will be curable. There are various screenings, such as mammograms and clinical breast exams, as well as self-exams that women may choose for early detection. Mammograms frequently detect tumors before they are evident thru a self-exam and are how the majority of breast cancers are initially detected. They can also identify minute fragments of calcium that could be the early stages of breast cancer. Women that are screened regularly thru mammograms can lower the mortality rate of breast cancer by about 30%. Most doctors advise that women should get a yearly mammogram starting between the ages of 40 and 50, depending on the patient's medical and family history. They also advise that women between the ages of 20 and 39 should have a clinical breast exam, administered by a health professional, every 3 years. Finally, all women should perform a self-breast exam every month, approximately a week after her period ends.

Another early detection tool for breast cancer is MRI screenings. These are typically recommended for women with a prevalent family history of breast cancer and/or those who have already had breast cancer. Other candidates for MRI screenings include women with very dense breasts, whose mammogram results may be too difficult to diagnose. Again, all decisions regarding what choice is right for you regarding breast cancer prevention and early detection should be discussed with your physician, taking into account your medical and family history.

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