

10 Things You Didn't Know About Breast Cancer

Learn what the latest research says in order to fight this potentially fatal disease

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October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month—a time to remember friends and family members who have battled the disease and also to consider how you can protect yourself. We scoured the latest research and spoke to experts to bring you 10 important facts you may not have known about this disease so you're better prepared to detect, prevent and fight it.

1. Secondhand smoke may increase your risk. You don't complain when coworkers blow plumes of smoke your way as you enter the office building, nor do you squawk when a girlfriend insists on going to a smoke-filled bar. But you may after reading this news. A new study of more than 500 women in Mexico found that those who were regularly exposed to secondhand smoke at their home or workplace had a three times higher risk of developing breast cancer than those who avoided castoff smoke.



2. African-American women are more likely to die from the disease. While breast cancer affects women of all ages and races, the most recent data from the American Cancer Society shines a disturbing light on a lesser-known fact about the disease: African-American women under the age of 45 are not only more likely to be diagnosed with breast cancer, but are also more likely to die from the disease. Experts aren't sure why this is, but they encourage African-American women to be diligent about detection and prevention,

including being aware of changes in their breasts and talking to their doctors about risk factors and screenings.

3. Your salad may provide cancer-zapping ingredients.

If you normally go for Caesar salad or mixed greens, consider mixing things up. Switching to watercress—a spicy green with a peppery kick—not only adds great flavor to salads and sandwiches, it also may help ward off breast cancer, say researchers. According to a recent study published in the *British Journal of Nutrition*, breast cancer patients who munched on 3 ounces of watercress experienced a measurable reduction in a key tumor growth factor six to eight hours afterward. To up your watercress intake, try this yummy, breast-cancer-fighting salad: Toss a bunch of washed, trimmed watercress leaves with a teaspoon of diced shallots and mandarin orange slices, then drizzle with your favorite light vinaigrette.

4. Looking for genetic clues? Your father's side of the family counts, too.

Did a relative on your father's side of the family have breast cancer? Most women mistakenly assume that the health problems of women on the paternal side of the family don't apply to them—a myth that can have grave health consequences. “When considering family history, you need to look at your mother's side of the family—and your father's side,” says Dina Roth Port, a health writer, breast cancer expert and the author of *Previvors: Facing the Breast Cancer Gene and Making Life-Changing Decisions*. “Years ago, women were often blindsided by breast cancer because they didn't know that cancers among their paternal relatives could indicate that they, too, were at risk. Now, experts know that the father's side counts as well.”

5. Your friends may be as powerful as anticancer drugs in the fight against breast cancer.

Do you get together with friends often? Here's an important reason to accept your pal's book club invitation: An active social life is not only good for your general health, but keeping up with your girlfriends may also reduce your risk of developing breast cancer. In a recent study, researchers at the University of Chicago report that lonely women may be at greater risk for breast cancer. The theory? Stress and anxiety caused by social isolation may have the power to increase the growth of tumors in the breasts.

6. Every 13 minutes, a woman dies of breast cancer.

Statistics on this killer disease are not encouraging. Aside from certain skin cancers, breast cancer is the most common cancer in women, says the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. According to the most recent data, from 2006, 191,410 American women were

diagnosed with breast cancer and 40,820 died from it. Perhaps more sobering is this exercise: List eight women in your life whom you love and admire. According to statistics, one of these women will develop breast cancer in her lifetime.

7. Early detection and treatment equates to a 96 percent survival rate, in most cases.

As discouraging as the news about breast cancer is, experts are quick to point out that early detection and treatment are key to improving your chances of beating the disease. In fact, according to estimates, 96 percent of women who detect their cancer early enough will be cancer-free in five years. “Receiving the right treatment for breast cancer early on is critical in the fight against breast cancer,” says Arthur Rossof, MD, an oncology specialist and the national medical director on Breast Cancer Treatment and Prevention for OptumHealth Care Solutions. “While significant advances have been made in the battle against breast cancer over the years, early detection provides the best opportunity for a successful outcome, even with some of the more aggressive forms of the disease.”

8. Found a lump? See your doc, but don't fret—80 percent of lumps are benign.

You found a lump in your breast. Now what? While it's a good reason to see your doctor (immediately!), try, as hard as it may be, not to fret. Here's why: Experts say that more than 80 percent of breast lumps turn out to be noncancerous and often harmless. And here's some more good news: Breast cancer rates may be falling, according to the most recent statistics. “During the '80s and '90s, breast cancer rates were steadily increasing,” says Dr. Rossof. “However, in recent years, possibly due in part to the drop in the use of hormone replacement therapy, the number of cases has leveled off or, in some age groups—such as women over 50—has even begun to drop.”

9. Fish oil may help you reduce your risk.

Want to reduce your breast cancer risk by 32 percent? Researchers in Seattle whose study was recently published in the journal *Cancer Epidemiology, Biomarkers & Prevention* advise taking a daily fish oil supplement. Here's why: The omega-3 fatty acids in fish oil may help combat breast cancer, particularly invasive ductal breast cancer—the most common form of the disease. Can't stomach supplements? Make sure you're eating foods rich in omega-3s, such as salmon, halibut, sardines, flaxseeds and nuts.

10. Heavy-duty cleaning supplies may cause more harm than good.

Your floors sparkle and your bathroom is disinfected. Pat yourself on the back? Maybe not, if you're using harsh chemicals, say researchers. There is some evidence that regular use of

powerful cleaning products, and even air fresheners, may increase your risk of developing breast cancer. According to a recent study published in the journal *Environmental Health*, many mainstream household cleaning products (no, they don't name names) may contain "endocrine disrupting chemicals" and other compounds that could be carcinogenic to mammary glands. What's a Queen of Clean to do? You don't have to toss your cleaning products, but should probably use the minimum amount of necessary to get an area clean and consider opening the windows while cleaning, letting as much fresh air inside as possible. And why not try some natural cleaners? Sure, you may have to use a little more elbow grease, but think of it as a muscle-toning activity! Mrs. Meyer's and Bon Ami both make good-quality, natural cleaning products that do the job without the chemical cloud.