Can breast cancer be prevented?

There is no sure way to prevent breast cancer. But there are things all women can do that might reduce their risk and help increase the odds that if cancer does occur, it is found at an early, more treatable stage.

For most women

You can lower your risk of breast cancer by changing those risk factors that are under your control. Body weight, physical activity, and diet have all been linked to breast cancer, so these might be areas where you can do something.

At this time, the best advice about diet and activity to possibly reduce the risk of breast cancer is to:

- Get regular physical activity.
- Reduce your lifetime weight gain by eating fewer calories and getting regular exercise.
- Avoid or limit your alcohol intake.

To find out more, see our document, American Cancer Society Guidelines on Nutrition and Physical Activity for Cancer Prevention.

Women who choose to breastfeed for at least several months may also reduce their breast cancer risk. Not using hormone therapy after menopause can also help you avoid raising your risk.

For women who are or may be at increased risk

If you have a higher risk for breast cancer there may be some things you can do to reduce your chances of getting breast cancer. Before deciding which, if any, of these may be right for you, talk with your doctor.

Genetic testing

Tests can tell if a woman has certain changed (mutated) genes linked to breast cancer. With this information, women can then take steps to reduce their risk.
If you are thinking about genetic testing, you should talk to a genetic counselor, nurse, or doctor qualified to explain the process and what the results of these tests could mean. It is very important that you know what genetic testing can and can't tell you, and to carefully weigh the pros and cons of testing before these tests are done. Testing costs a lot and may not be covered by some health insurance plans. For more information, see our document, *Genetic Testing: What You Need to Know*. You might also want to visit the National Cancer Institute web site: [www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/factsheet/Risk/BRCA](http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/factsheet/Risk/BRCA).

**Taking drugs to lower your risk**

The drugs *tamoxifen* and *raloxifene* (Evista®) have both been shown to lower breast cancer risk in studies, and are approved for this use by the FDA. Raloxifene is only approved for use in women after menopause, while tamoxifen can be taken by both pre-menopausal and post-menopausal women. Other drugs (such as aromatase inhibitors) are also being studied. To learn more about these drugs, please see the American Cancer Society document, *Medicines to Reduce Breast Cancer Risk*.

**Surgery to lower your risk**

For the few women who are at a very high risk for breast cancer, surgery to remove the breasts or ovaries may be an option.

Surgery to remove the breasts lowers the risk of breast cancer, but it doesn’t completely prevent it. Even when this surgery is done perfectly, a small amount of breast tissue remains. Breast cancer can still start in the breast tissue that is left.

Having the ovaries removed before menopause is another way to lower breast cancer risk.

There needs to be very strong reasons for having this type of surgery. There is no way to know ahead of time if this surgery will help any one woman.

More information about using surgery to lower the risk of breast cancer can be found in our document, *Breast Cancer*.

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