



Staying Aware: The Importance of Regular Breast Cancer Screening

discussing difficult topics

In the U.S., 1 in 8 women will develop breast cancer, making it one of the most common cancers for women, second only to skin cancer.¹ Fortunately, 66% of breast cancer cases are diagnosed at a localized stage, before cancer has spread outside of the breast, resulting in a 99% five-year survival. This fact underscores the critical role early detection plays in saving lives.

The more you know about breast cancer, the bigger role you can play in helping yourself or others who may be worried about the disease. Below we discuss the risk factors of breast cancer, how to recognize early signs, and the different types of tests available for breast cancer screening.

Risk Factors

Anyone can develop breast cancer in their lifetime, including, though rarely, men. Some individuals are more likely to develop breast cancer due to previous health conditions, family history, and lifestyle factors. The biggest risk of breast cancer is age. Women over 50 are more likely to be diagnosed with breast cancer than younger women.² However, if you have a family history of breast or ovarian cancer or have genetic mutations, you are at a higher risk of developing the disease well before the age of 50.

Your body's anatomy can also increase your risk of breast cancer. Women who started menstruating before age 12 and/or began menopause after age 55 are at higher risk due to prolonged exposure to hormones. Additionally, women with dense breasts may find it harder to detect tumors, increasing their likelihood of developing breast cancer.

Detecting Early Signs

If you fall into any of these categories, it is crucial to be aware of the early signs that may indicate a tumor in your breast. The best way to do this is by monitoring any changes in your breast's appearance and feel. Common signs include:

- A lump or thickening area of skin in or near the breast or in the underarm area
- Changes in size, shape, or appearance of the breast
- Peeling, scaling, crusting, or flaking of the skin on the breast
- Changes to the skin over the breast, such as dimpling or puckering
- Nipple discharge, especially if it's bloody
- A nipple that looks flattened or turns inward

Types of Exams

There are three primary exams that women can undergo in a clinical setting to screen for breast cancer: mammograms, MRIs, and clinical breast exams. Mammograms are the most common screening tool due to their ability to detect cancer early. They use a low dose of X-rays to identify signs of cancer before symptoms appear. Some facilities offer 3D mammograms, which can help detect cancer in women with dense breasts more effectively.

Another exam is the clinical breast exam, where a healthcare provider uses their hands to check for lumps or changes in the breast. It is also recommended that women perform similar self-exams at home to check for abnormalities.

When to Test

The American Cancer Society provides detailed guidelines for when women of average risk should begin breast cancer screening:³

- Women between the ages of 40 and 44 have the option to start screening with a mammogram every year
- Women 45 to 54 should get mammograms every year
- Women 55 and older can switch to a mammogram every other year, or they can choose to continue yearly mammograms

If you are at higher risk due to family medical history or physical characteristics, you should discuss with your doctor about starting screenings earlier.

CONCLUSION

A breast cancer diagnosis impacts thousands of women and their families every year. While there is no guarantee that you or a woman in your life will develop breast cancer, regular screening can ensure that cancer is detected early, improving the chances of successful treatment. Please speak with your doctor about any concerns or questions you may have about the disease.

FAIRPORT WEALTH

1350 Euclid Ave, Ste 400
Cleveland, OH 44115
(216) 431-3000

¹ Team, N. (2024, August 1). Breast Cancer Facts & Stats 2024 - Incidence, age, survival, & more. National Breast Cancer Foundation. <https://www.nationalbreastcancer.org/breast-cancer-facts/>

² Breast cancer risk factors. (2024, September 11). Breast Cancer. <https://www.cdc.gov/breast-cancer/risk-factors/index.html>

³ ACS Breast cancer screening Guidelines. (n.d.). American Cancer Society. <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/types/breast-cancer/screening-tests-and-early-detection/american-cancer-society-recommendations-for-the-early-detection-of-breast-cancer.html>

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