

# Lifelines

from the National Cancer Institute



## What Black Women Need to Know About Breast Cancer

*By the National Cancer Institute*

October marks the 26th anniversary of National Breast Cancer Awareness Month. Is there cause for celebration? For many reasons, the answer is a resounding "yes." The number of women diagnosed with breast cancer in the United States began decreasing in 1999 and death rates have dropped steadily since 1990. Research- much of it funded by the National Cancer Institute-has improved our understanding of breast cancer and produced more effective treatments.

Still, progress for African American women is lagging behind. Although African Americans are less likely than white women to be diagnosed with breast cancer, they have higher rates of death from the disease than any other racial or ethnic group in the United States. Breast cancer death rates have decreased among African American women in recent years, but the decline has been slower than that in white women. And African American women are more likely to be diagnosed at later stages, when cancer has spread beyond the breast-and when it is more difficult to treat.

The good news is that there is power in information. Get the facts. And, always, talk with your health care provider about treatment.

Here's what you need to know about breast cancer:

- Breast cancer is a cancer that forms in tissues of the breast, usually the ducts (tubes that carry milk to the nipple) and lobules (glands that make milk). It occurs in both men and women, although male breast cancer is rare.
- An estimated 207,090 women and 1,970 men will be diagnosed with breast cancer this year. More than 19,000 of those diagnosed will be African American women-breast cancer is the most common cancer in African American women. But more than three out of four African American women diagnosed with breast cancer are survivors five years after diagnosis.
- Mammograms are x-ray pictures of the breast that can find breast cancer early. [Screening mammograms](#) are used to check for breast cancer in women who have no symptoms of the disease. If you are age 40 or older, you should have screening mammograms every one to two years. Women who are at higher than average risk of breast cancer should talk with their health care provider about whether to have

mammograms before age 40 and how often to have them. Some state and local health programs and employers provide mammograms for free or at low cost. Information about low-cost or free mammography screening programs is also available through NCI's Cancer Information Service at [www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov). [Learn more about mammograms](#).

- Many risk factors for breast cancer have been identified. Risk factors are anything that can increase your chance of getting a disease. Some breast cancer risk factors cannot be changed (such as your age or family history), whereas others can. But having a risk factor doesn't mean that you will get breast cancer. To better understand your risk, visit NCI's Web site, "[Understanding Mammograms and Your Risk of Breast Cancer](#)."
- Don't ignore symptoms. If you notice any changes in your breasts, be proactive and visit your health care professional. Most changes are not breast cancer, but they should always be checked.
- Research has shown that increased physical activity may reduce risk for breast cancer. Even moderate exercise, such as a 30 minute daily walk, can make a big difference in improving your overall health. Make physical activity a part of your everyday life.
- Weight gain after you reach menopause may increase your risk for breast cancer. Doctors know that obesity can increase your risk for a number of diseases-so it makes sense to maintain a healthy weight at any age.
- Drinking alcohol can increase your breast cancer risk. If you are concerned, talk with your health care professional about reducing your consumption of alcoholic beverages.

To learn more about breast cancer, visit the National Cancer Institute Web site at [www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov) (search term: breast) or call 1-800-4-CANCER (that's 1-800-422-6237). NCI has a variety of information on breast cancer risk, prevention, screening, treatment, clinical trials and a host of other topics.

*NCI leads the National Cancer Program and the NIH effort to dramatically reduce the burden of cancer and improve the lives of cancer patients and their families, through research into prevention and cancer biology, the development of new interventions, and the training and mentoring of new researchers. For more information about cancer, please visit the NCI Web site at [www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov) or call NCI's Cancer Information Service at 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237).*