

Lifelines™

from the National Cancer Institute



Useful Information for Black Women During Breast Cancer Awareness Month

By the National Cancer Institute

October marks National Breast Cancer Awareness Month. Is there cause for celebration? For many reasons, the answer is a resounding “yes.” Since 1990, the rate of death from breast cancer has been dropping. Research—much of it funded by the National Cancer Institute (NCI)—has improved our understanding of breast cancer and produced more effective treatments.

Yet nearly 27,000 African American women were expected to be diagnosed last year with breast cancer, the most common cancer among this group. And although [African American women are less likely than white women to be diagnosed with breast cancer](#), those African American women who do develop the disease are more likely to die from it than women of any other racial or ethnic group in the United States. Part of the reason is that they 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, as always, talk with your health care provider about your concerns.

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 226,870 women and 2,190 men will be diagnosed with breast cancer in the United States this year. Nearly 27,000 of those diagnosed last year were African American women. But more than three out of four African American women diagnosed with breast cancer will survive at least five years after diagnosis.
- Mammograms are x-ray pictures of the breast that can be used to check for breast cancer in women who have no symptoms of the disease. This type of mammogram is called a screening mammogram. Early detection of breast cancer with screening mammography means that treatment can be started earlier in the course of the disease, possibly before it has spread. If you are age 40 or older, you should have mammograms every 1 to 2 years. Women who are at higher than average risk of breast cancer should

Posted October 2012

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 (see below).

- Don't ignore any symptoms. If you notice any changes in how your breasts look or feel, check with your health care provider. Most changes will not be from breast cancer, but they should always be checked.
- Many risk factors for breast cancer have been identified. Risk factors are anything that can increase your chance of developing a disease. Some breast cancer risk factors cannot be changed (such as your age or a history of breast cancer in your family), whereas others can. But having a risk factor doesn't mean that you will get breast cancer. To better understand your risk of breast cancer, read the NCI publication "Breast Cancer Risk in American Women" at <http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/factsheet/detection/probability-breast-cancer>
- Women considering hormone therapy for menopause should know that combination therapy—which includes both estrogen and progestin—increases the risk for breast cancer.
- Research has shown that exercise may help lower breast cancer risk. Try to make physical activity a part of your everyday life. Strenuous exercise for as little as 4 hours a week can lower your risk.
- Being obese 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.

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 or call NCI's Cancer Information Service at 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237). More articles and videos in the culturally relevant Lifelines series are available at www.cancer.gov/lifelines.