

## Breast Cancer: Overview

Despite recent medical findings and increased public awareness, breast cancer continues to be one of the leading causes of death among women. While the causes and effects of breast cancer are more widely studied and discussed than ever before, many people are still unaware of exactly how the disease affects the body, and what can be done to prevent it.

To fully understand breast cancer, you must know the physical composition of the breast. Breasts are masses of tissue that contain a number of lobes. Each lobe consists of smaller lobules, containing the glands that produce milk. The lobes generate the milk, which then travels through ducts and eventually to the nipple. The breast also contains lymph nodes. While not used in milk production, lymph nodes help to expel harmful bacteria, cancerous cells and other potentially dangerous entities. Fatty tissues make up the remaining breast constitution.

With this very general understanding of the physical composition of breasts, it's a little easier to understand how cancerous cells can affect them. Cells become cancerous when normal cells grow and divide improperly. This can be due to the creation of new cells when the body does not find them necessary, or it can be caused by the extended life of old cells that the body expected to die. These unnecessary cells will sometimes split and multiply, causing a growth or tumor.

There are two types of tumors: malignant and benign. Benign tumors are not cancerous, are rarely life threatening and can usually be removed. Because benign tumors do not typically spread to other parts of the body, they are easy to contain. Malignant tumors, on the other hand, present the formal term for cancer. The risks caused by these growths can be extremely dire and while they can be surgically removed, they may grow back. Cancerous masses or tumors can also spread or metastasize to other parts of the body, causing immense widespread trauma to overall health.

Breast cancer generally begins in the lymph nodes of the breast. Once established, the cancer can spread throughout the body to the bones, liver, lungs and brain. When this type of cancer spreads, it does not take on a new form of cancer. It is simply a new infection of the same cancer, but in a different location within the body.

Breast cancer most commonly occurs in women 40 years or older. While younger women and even men may become afflicted with breast cancer, those women aged 40 and over must be particularly cautious. Doctors recommend that women 40 and over should have a mammogram once per year. Early detection is the key to surviving breast cancer; if the cancer is allowed enough time to metastasize, it can become a much more serious problem to contain. Regular breast exams are also advised. It takes just a few minutes for a doctor to perform this essential and potentially life-saving exercise. Women should also perform breast self-examinations at home. If you're not sure how to perform a self-exam, ask your doctor.

Common symptoms that may accompany breast cancer include a change in appearance of the nipple or the breast or nipple. The nipple may become inverted, turning inwards towards the breast, or the breast may suddenly change in size or shape. Nipple discharge is another symptom of breast cancer. If you have experienced any of these symptoms, see your doctor or health care professional immediately.

The best way to lessen the effects of breast cancer is through early diagnosis. Learn to perform breast self-examination, and see your doctor for regular physical checkups.