

Overview - Breast cancer in women

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Breast cancer is the most common type of cancer in the UK. Most women diagnosed with breast cancer are over 50, but younger women can also get breast cancer.

About one in eight women are diagnosed with breast cancer during their lifetime. There's a good chance of recovery if it's detected in its early stages.

For this reason, it's vital that women check their breasts regularly for any changes and always get any changes examined by their GP.

In rare cases, men can also be diagnosed with breast cancer. Read about [breast cancer in men](#).

Symptoms of breast cancer

Breast cancer can have a number of symptoms, but the first noticeable symptom is usually a lump or area of thickened breast tissue.

Most [breast lumps](#) aren't cancerous, but it's always best to have them checked by your doctor.

You should also see your GP if you notice any of the following:

- a change in the size or shape of one or both breasts
- [discharge from either of your nipples](#), which may be streaked with blood
- a lump or swelling in either of your armpits
- dimpling on the skin of your breasts
- a rash on or around your nipple
- a change in the appearance of your nipple, such as becoming sunken into your breast

Breast pain isn't usually a symptom of breast cancer.

Read more about the [symptoms of breast cancer](#).

Causes of breast cancer

The exact causes of breast cancer aren't fully understood. However, there are certain factors known to increase the risk of breast cancer.

These include:

- age – the risk increases as you get older
- a family history of breast cancer
- a previous diagnosis of breast cancer
- a previous benign breast lump
- being tall, overweight or obese
- drinking alcohol

Read more about the [causes of breast cancer](#).

Diagnosing breast cancer

After examining your breasts, your GP may refer you to a specialist breast cancer clinic for further tests. This might include breast screening (mammography) or a [biopsy](#).

Read about [how breast cancer is diagnosed](#).

Types of breast cancer

There are several different types of breast cancer, which can develop in different parts of the breast.

Breast cancer is often divided into:

- **non-invasive breast cancer (carcinoma in situ)** – found in the ducts of the breast (ductal carcinoma in situ, DCIS) and hasn't developed the ability to spread outside the breast. It's usually found during a mammogram and rarely shows as a breast lump.
- **invasive breast cancer** – usually develops in the cells that line the breast ducts (invasive ductal breast cancer) and is the most common type of breast cancer. It can spread outside the breast, although this doesn't necessarily mean it has spread.

Other less common types of breast cancer include:

- invasive (and pre-invasive) lobular breast cancer
- inflammatory breast cancer
- [Paget's disease of the breast](#)

It's possible for breast cancer to spread to other parts of the body, usually through the bloodstream or the axillary lymph nodes. These are small lymphatic glands that filter bacteria and cells from the mammary gland.

If this happens, it's known as secondary, or metastatic, breast cancer.

Breast cancer screening

Mammographic screening, where [X-ray](#) images of the breast are taken, is the most commonly available method of detecting an early breast lesion.

However, you should be aware that a mammogram might fail to detect some breast cancers.

It might also increase your chances of having extra tests and interventions, including surgery, even if you're not affected by breast cancer.

Women with a higher-than-average risk of developing breast cancer may be offered screening and genetic testing for the condition.

As the risk of breast cancer increases with age, all women who are 50 to 70 years old are invited for breast cancer screening every three years.

Women over the age of 70 are also entitled to screening and can arrange an appointment through their GP or local screening unit.

The NHS is in the process of extending the programme as a trial, offering screening to some women aged 47 to 73.

Read about [breast screening](#).

Find [breast cancer screening services near you](#).

Treating breast cancer

If cancer is detected at an early stage, it can be treated before it spreads to nearby parts of the body.

Breast cancer is treated using a combination of:

- surgery
- [chemotherapy](#)
- [radiotherapy](#)

Surgery is usually the first type of treatment you'll have, followed by chemotherapy or radiotherapy or, in some cases, hormone or biological treatments.

The type of surgery and the treatment you have afterwards will depend on the type of breast cancer you have. Your doctor will discuss the best treatment plan with you.

In a small proportion of women, breast cancer is discovered after it's spread to other parts of the body (metastatic breast cancer).

Secondary cancer, also called advanced or metastatic cancer, isn't curable, so the aim of treatment is to achieve remission (symptom relief).

Read about [treating breast cancer](#).

Living with breast cancer

Being diagnosed with breast cancer can affect daily life in many ways, depending on what stage it's at and the treatment you're having.

How women cope with their diagnosis and treatment varies from person to person. You can be reassured that there are several forms of support available, if you need it.

For example:

- your family and friends can be a powerful support system
- you can communicate with other people in the same situation
- find out as much as possible about your condition
- don't try to do too much or overexert yourself
- make time for yourself

Read about [living with breast cancer](#).

Preventing breast cancer

As the causes of breast cancer aren't fully understood, at the moment it's not possible to know if it can be prevented.

If you're at increased risk of developing the condition, some treatments are available to reduce the risk.

Studies have looked at the link between breast cancer and diet. Although there are no definite conclusions, there are benefits for women who:

- maintain a [healthy weight](#)
- [exercise regularly](#)
- have a low intake of saturated [fat](#)
- do not drink [alcohol](#)

It's been suggested that regular exercise can reduce your risk of breast cancer by as much as a third. Regular exercise and a healthy lifestyle can also improve the outlook for people affected by breast cancer.

If you've been through the menopause, it's particularly important that you're not overweight or obese.

This is because being overweight or obese causes more oestrogen to be produced, which can increase the risk of breast cancer.

Read about [preventing breast cancer](#).

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