

Health Spotlight: Breast cancer

- A woman is diagnosed with breast cancer every 14 seconds worldwide¹
- One in seven Australian women will be diagnosed with breast cancer in their lifetime²
- In 2022 more than 3,200 Australians died of breast cancer²
- Around 13% of all new cancer diagnoses in Australia in 2022 were breast cancer³

What is breast cancer?

Breast cancer is a type of cancer that originates in the cells of the breast. It occurs when cells in the breast begin to grow uncontrollably, forming a lump or tumor. Breast cancer can affect both men and women, but it is far more common in women.²

There are several types of breast cancer, but the two most common are invasive ductal carcinoma and invasive lobular carcinoma.⁴ Breast cancer is categorised into stages, ranging from stage zero (non-invasive) to stage four (advanced or metastatic). The stage of the cancer when it is diagnosed will influence treatment options.⁵

Warning signs

There are a number of changes or painful symptoms in the breast that could indicate breast cancer. These include lumps (especially in one breast only), a change in breast size or shape, redness, ulceration or discharge in the nipple, or unusual pains in the breast that do not go away.

If you do experience some of these symptoms, seek medical advice. Your doctor may use an approach known as the 'triple test' to assess whether your symptoms are of concern.

This involves taking any family history of breast cancer, imaging tests like mammograms, and a biopsy to test tissue within the breast.⁶ If the results of these tests are concerning to your doctor, you may be advised to see a specialist for further tests or treatment.

Risk factors

Several risk factors can increase the likelihood of developing breast cancer. These include age, family history, genetics, hormonal factors, and lifestyle choices.

Women aged 50 are ten times more likely to be diagnosed with breast cancer than those aged 30 years old, and the average age of diagnosis for women is 61.⁷ Around 5% of breast cancers can also be explained by inherited genes, such as BRCA1 and BRCA2, which are associated with a high risk of breast cancer. Hormone levels and exposure to the hormone oestrogen, which occurs naturally in women, can also increase risk. The younger a woman is when she has her first period, the higher the risk for breast cancer, and similarly going through menopause at a later age can increase breast cancer risk.⁷

Ways to reduce your risk

- Be aware of changes to the shape and feel of your breasts
- Know your family history, and consider asking your doctor about genetic testing if you have a strong history of breast cancer
- Understand the lifestyle factors influencing your risk level - poor lifestyle factors have been shown to increase your risk of breast cancer, including being overweight or obese, alcohol consumption and smoking⁸

1 Breast Cancer Statistics and Resources. Breast Cancer Research Foundation

2 Breast Cancer stats in Australia. National Breast Cancer Foundation 2023

3 Breast cancer in Australia statistics. Australian Government, January 2023

4 Types of breast cancer. Breast Cancer Network Australia 2023

5 Stages of breast cancer. Australian Government, October 2021

6 Tests for breast cancer. Australian Government, October 2021

7 Breast cancer risk factors. Australian Government 2023

8 What are the risk factors for breast cancer? Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, July 25

