

THE RISE OF EARLY ONSET BREAST CANCER

FOR PATIENTS

Breast cancer is the most common type of cancer among women, excluding skin cancer, and the second leading cause of cancer death after lung cancer in the U.S. and Texas.^{1,3} Approximately 1 in 8 women (13.1%) in the U.S. will be diagnosed with breast cancer in their lifetime, and 1 in 43 women (2.3%) will die from it.² While most cases occur in women over 40, younger women are increasingly being affected, and early detection can help.

Since 2012, incidence rates have risen by about 1% each year, with a greater increase among women younger than 50 compared to those 50 and older.² In Texas, breast cancer is also the most common cancer among women, and those diagnosed between ages 20 and 49 are more likely to be diagnosed at advanced stages.³ Researchers continue to investigate why cases are rising in younger women, but possible factors include changes in childbearing and breastfeeding patterns, increased alcohol use, excess body weight, genetics, and environmental exposure.⁴

Breast cancer develops when the cells in the breast tissue grow and multiply abnormally, often forming a lump or mass. Most breast cancers start in the ducts – the small canals that connect milk glands to the nipple, or the lobules – the glands that produce breast milk.

Common Signs and Symptoms^{5,6}

- The most common sign is the presence of a new lump in the breast or armpit
- Skin changes (redness, inflammation, or dimpling)
- Swollen lymph nodes under the arm or near the collar bone
- A change in breast shape or size
- Swelling of all or part of a breast
- Nipple changes or discharge
- Breast or nipple pain

Symptoms of breast cancer may not be easy to recognize early. While a painless, firm, irregular mass is common with cancer, lumps can also be soft,

tender, or painful. Although not all breast changes are cancer, any new or unusual symptoms should be checked by your physician. Knowing what your breasts normally feel and look like through self-administered breast exams can help you detect any changes early. It is important not to dismiss symptoms based on your age, pregnancy, or breast feeding. Breast cancer can develop at any age, and early detection is key to better outcomes.

Risk Factors^{7,8}

While the exact cause of breast cancer is unknown, certain factors can increase your risk of developing breast cancer. These factors include:

- Beginning menstruation before age 12
- Giving birth for the first time after age 30
- A personal history of breast or ovarian cancer
- Family history of breast cancer in close relatives
- Having BRCA1 or BRCA2 gene mutations
- Having very dense breast tissue
- Having high-risk benign (non-cancerous or pre-cancerous) breast conditions
- Receiving radiation therapy to your chest before age 30
- Being overweight
- Physical inactivity
- Alcohol use

Studies show that although non-Hispanic white women are more likely to be diagnosed with breast cancer overall, breast cancer occurs more often in non-Hispanic Black women before the age of 40.² Additionally, Black women are more likely to die from breast cancer. They are also more likely to develop triple-negative breast cancer, a faster-growing and more aggressive type that can spread or come back more easily.^{1,9}

If any of these factors apply to you, it does not mean you have or will get breast cancer, but it does mean your risk may be higher than average. Talk to your physician about your risk factors, when you should begin screening, and how to reduce your risk.

Lower Your Risk ^{3,10,11}

Although many risk factors are beyond one's control, studies show that 30% of breast cancer cases are linked to factors that can be changed. Some steps you can take to reduce your risk of developing breast cancer include:

- Being physically active
- Maintaining a healthy weight
- Avoiding or limiting alcohol consumption
- Breastfeeding, if possible
- Limiting menopausal hormone therapy

Available Screening ¹²

The American College of Radiology (ACR) recommends that women at average risk begin annual breast cancer screening at age 40 and that all women have a breast cancer risk evaluation by age 25.¹³ Women at higher risk may need to start screening earlier and/or undergo more intensive testing.⁸ Please refer to the table below for available screening tests, and be sure to discuss your options with your physician.

Test	Description	ACR Recommendation
Mammogram	<p><i>Low dose x-rays done with a machine designed to look only at breast tissue.</i></p> <p>Digital Mammography (DM) Standard 2D exam where the breasts are compressed from two different angles (once from top to bottom and once from side to side) while x-rays are taken.</p> <p>Digital Breast Tomosynthesis (DBT) Referred to as a 3D mammography. Same as with a standard (2D) mammogram, but the machine takes multiple x-rays as it moves in a small arc around the breast. A computer then puts the images together into a series of thin slices.</p>	<p>Annual mammograms starting at age 40.</p> <p>Screening should continue past age 74 without an upper age limit.</p>
Breast Ultrasound	Sends out sound waves and picks up the echoes as they bounce off body tissues deeper under the skin. These echoes are made into a picture on a computer screen. It can show certain breast changes, like fluid-filled cysts, that can be harder to see on mammograms.	Not typically used as a routine screening test for breast cancer. May be used if you have dense breast tissue.
Breast MRI	Uses radio waves and strong magnets to make detailed pictures of the inside of the breast. MRI requires that you have a contrast dye injected into your vein (through an IV line) before the pictures are taken.	Used only if breast cancer is suspected and done after other imaging tests such as mammograms and ultrasounds.
Breast Cancer Risk Assessment Tool	An educational resource that helps estimate your risk for cancer based on different combinations of risk factors and different data sets.	All women should take a risk assessment by age 25

For most high-risk women, ACR recommends a breast MRI as a supplemental test in addition to mammography. Talk to your physician if you believe you may be at higher risk.

It should be noted that 3D mammograms often cost more than 2D mammograms, and this added cost may not be covered by your insurance. Insurance coverage for mammograms before age 40 varies, so be sure to check with your insurance company to understand what is covered.

1. <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/types/breast-cancer/about/how-common-is-breast-cancer.html>
2. <https://www.cancer.org/content/dam/cancer-org/research/cancer-facts-and-statistics/breast-cancer-facts-and-figures/2024/breast-cancer-facts-and-figures-2024.pdf>
3. <https://www.dshs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/tcr/Statistics/2024-Female-Breast-Cancer-Data-Brief.pdf>
4. <https://www.bcrf.org/about-breast-cancer/breast-cancer-young-women/>
5. <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/types/breast-cancer/screening-tests-and-early-detection/breast-cancer-signs-and-symptoms.html>
6. <https://www.bcrf.org/about-breast-cancer/signs-of-breast-cancer/>
7. <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/types/breast-cancer/risk-and-prevention/breast-cancer-risk-factors-you-cannot-change.html>

8. <https://www.bcrf.org/about-breast-cancer/risk-factors-for-breast-cancer/>
9. <https://www.komen.org/breast-cancer/risk-factor/race-ethnicity/>
10. Poorvu, P.D., Partridge, A.H. (2020). Epidemiology. In: Gentilini, O., Partridge, A.H., Pagani, O. (eds) Breast Cancer in Young Women. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-24762-1_1
11. <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/types/breast-cancer/risk-and-prevention/can-i-lower-my-risk.html>
12. [https://www.jacr.org/article/S1546-1440\(21\)00383-5/fulltext?_ga=2.29208892.1432425254.1682971698-2035821856.1636737310&_gl=1*_nyc9hs*_gcl_au*NjgyNTk0MDM4LjE3NTczNTcyNDY.*_ga*MjA5NDU5OTI2MjA4xNzU3MzU3MjQ2*_ga_K9XZBF7MXP*_czE3NTczNjQxMzckbkZzEkdDE3NTczNjU3NzMcakjM1JGwwwJGgw](https://www.jacr.org/article/S1546-1440(21)00383-5/fulltext?_ga=2.29208892.1432425254.1682971698-2035821856.1636737310&_gl=1*_nyc9hs*_gcl_au*NjgyNTk0MDM4LjE3NTczNTcyNDY.*_ga*MjA5NDU5OTI2MjA4xNzU3MzU3MjQ2*_ga_K9XZBF7MXP*_czE3NTczNjQxMzckbkZzEkdDE3NTczNjU3NzMcakjM1JGwwwJGgw)
13. <https://www.acr.org/News-and-Publications/Media-Center/2023/New-ACR-Breast-Cancer-Screening-Guidelines-call-for-earlier-screening-for-high-risk-women>

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