



Lifestyle Changes to Reduce Risk of Breast and Ovarian Cancer

There is good evidence that making healthy lifestyle changes reduces our chances of developing breast and ovarian cancer.

Ways to Prevent Cancer

There are 3 basic ways to reduce your risk of breast or ovarian cancer:

- Adopt a lifestyle that lowers risk.
- Reduce exposure to cancer-causing agents.
- If you are at very high risk, consider preventive medicine or surgery.

Of these, changing lifestyle in a positive way is something we can all do for ourselves to reduce cancer risk. This handout discusses how exercise, diet, alcohol use, and stress can affect cancer risk. It also includes information on making changes.

A great deal has been learned about how people successfully make changes. Most often, they do it in steps. They:

- Become aware that they might want to make a change.
- Decide to change and learn how to change.
- Make the change in a way that works for them.
- Maintain the change for months and more.

If you are reading this handout with interest, you are already well on your way toward any lifestyle changes you wish to make.

Exercise can reduce your cancer risk, help you maintain a healthy weight, and make you feel good.

Exercise to Reduce Cancer Risk

Studies have shown that women who exercise more have less breast cancer. Physical activity reduces risk of breast cancer by about 25% to 30% or more. Exercise may reduce risk in several ways by:

- Lowering levels of the hormone estrogen in the body.
- Reducing fat tissue in the body.
- Improving the immune system, which may help control the development of tumors.

Exercise is also key in maintaining calorie balance and a healthy weight (see “Maintain a Healthy Weight” on page 4). The usual recommendation for exercise is 30 minutes or more of moderate exercise on most days of the week. This 30 minutes can be in 10 or 15 minute spurts – for example, a 10-minute walk to and from work and 10 minutes of activity in the evening. Exercise need not be done all at one time to be effective.

Tips for Change

Some people find it helpful to set goals and reward themselves when they meet them. When setting goals for yourself, make them specific, realistic (do-able), and flexible. For example, the goal, “walk 30 minutes every day” is specific and may be realistic, but it isn’t flexible. What if it rains on a day you have no umbrella? “Walk 30 minutes at least 4 days this week” is specific, realistic, and flexible – a great goal!

Reward yourself for meeting your goals. Rewards can be any non-food item you enjoy. Buying a new CD or setting time aside for yourself are examples of good rewards.

If you decide to exercise more, choose activities you will stick with. Consider getting an “exercise buddy.” You can encourage each other and enjoy each other’s company. Start easy and build up gradually to avoid soreness. In a few weeks, you’ll find that exercise has another benefit – it makes you feel good!

Eat for Life

There is good evidence that a healthy diet can lower risk of breast and ovarian cancer as well as risk of other cancers. Diets associated with lower cancer risk:

- Are low in fat, with 15% to 30% of calories from fat. (Some foods may be high in fat, but others should be lower for a low total.)
- Contain enough calories to support your activity level, without excess.

- Are high in natural fiber with foods like whole grains, fruits and vegetables.
- Contain dietary fats that are mostly unsaturated and come from plants (such as nuts and seeds, and soy, olive, and corn oil).
- Include 5 or more servings a day of fruits and vegetables, including cruciferous vegetables like broccoli, cabbage, and cauliflower.

Diet can make a difference to cancer risk by reducing extensive estrogen exposure and exposure to pollutants. Diet also likely improves the body's defenses against cancer. Excess exposure to the hormone estrogen is believed to be a risk factor for breast cancer. Since estrogen is excreted by the bowel, a high-fiber diet may also reduce breast cancer risk by promoting estrogen excretion.

Fat-soluble toxins in the environment are less likely to be concentrated significantly in fats from plants than they are in animal fats such as lard and butter. Substances in cruciferous vegetables like cabbage and broccoli reduce mammary cancer in animals. Their effects in humans are not yet certain, but these foods are good in themselves, and they may reduce cancer risk.

The effect of the plant estrogens (phytoestrogens) found in soy foods is not well understood in humans. Our present recommendation is that soy in the diet from sources such as soy nuts, tofu, and soymilk may help with some menopausal symptoms. In moderate amounts, they are not likely to increase risk of breast cancer. On the other hand, large doses of phytoestrogens in pill or powder form should probably be avoided by women who have or are at high risk of breast cancer until more is known about their effects.

Tips for Change

Read the store labels on food to learn their fiber content, the percent of calories from fat, and the kinds of fat they contain. Make changes gradually. For example, if you presently drink whole milk (about 4% fat), try going to 2% milk, then try 1% or nonfat milk. In time, whole milk will taste like cream!

Maintain a Healthy Weight

Weight gain after menopause has been linked to an increased risk of breast cancer. The body can make estrogen in fat tissue, so minimizing fat with exercise, a low-fat diet, and calorie balance may reduce breast cancer risk by reducing estrogen exposure.

**Choose healthy foods
and make gradual
changes in your diet.**

**Take the time to read
food labels.**

Maintain a healthy weight to lower your cancer risk.

Change the kinds of food and the way you eat rather than aiming for a certain weight.

Tips for Change

There are 3 ways to reduce weight: increase activity (burn more calories), eat less (take in fewer calories), or do both. Most people who have long-term success with weight reduction do it 1) gradually, over months, and 2) increase their activity level with exercise (see “Exercise to Reduce Cancer Risk” on page 2). They may also combine exercise and a low-fat diet.

When changing your diet, it is easier and perhaps safer to change the kinds of food you eat and the way you eat than to aim at a certain weight change. If your calorie balance is high, try eating slowly. It takes 15 to 20 minutes for the brain to get the message that you have been fed. Fruits and vegetables can help you feel full, and small plates make portions seem bigger. Find healthy foods you enjoy and use these to replace less healthy ones. Eat on a regular basis, and avoid letting yourself feel deprived of food.

Limit Alcohol

Many studies show that drinking alcohol increases breast cancer risk, and there is evidence that it may increase ovarian cancer risk as well. Even a drink or so a day has been reported to double breast cancer risk, and greater alcohol consumption carries greater risk. If you do drink, do so only in moderation (less than a drink a day).

Tips for Change

If alcohol drinking is a problem, learn what situations tempt you to drink more than you would like. Avoid these, and substitute other activities. Many people successfully reduce or stop their use of alcohol after trying several times.

Don't use alcohol for stress reduction. Instead, try the methods on page 5.

Reduce Stress

Stress has been linked strongly to lung infections and heart, gastrointestinal, and autoimmune diseases. Stress might affect breast cancer as well. Some studies show that women who develop breast cancer are more affected by stressful events than women who do not develop breast cancer, though the number of stressful events may be similar in both groups. Stress may affect tumor growth by changing hormone levels and the immune system.

Though it is not yet certain that stress affects breast cancer, it is useful to know how to deal with stress. None of us chooses the amount of stress in our lives, but with knowledge, we can limit its effects. Many find these methods helpful.

- Develop your support network. Choose the positive parts of this network of friends, family, and other helpers.
- Learn to gladly accept, as well as give, help.
- Learn relaxation techniques like meditation, yoga, prayer, and/or slow, deep breathing, and use them when needed.
- Consult a counselor or psychologist experienced in stress reduction.
- Work to adopt a lifestyle that promotes mild or moderate, but not severe, levels of stress.
- Enjoy exercise.
- Engage in activities that give you joy.

Preventing Other Cancers

Breast and ovarian cancer may be your primary cancer concerns, but risk of other cancers can also be reduced. In addition to the suggestions above:

- Don't smoke.
- Avoid excessive sun exposure and use sunscreen when exposed.

You can reduce your risk of breast and ovarian cancer with healthy lifestyle changes. These changes can bring a double bonus: reduced risk of later cancer, and their main side effect – good health.

Find the methods that help lower your stress, and put them into practice.

There are many helpful books and short classes on managing stress.

Get help, if you need it.

Questions?

Your questions are important. Ask your provider which set of numbers below should be used so you can reach your health care provider if you have questions or concerns.

Women's Health Care
Center, Roosevelt Clinic
4245 Roosevelt Way
Call: 206-598-5500

Seattle Cancer Care
Alliance (SCCA)
Call: 206-288-7300

Martha Rivkin Center
for Ovarian Cancer
Research
Call: 206-215-6200 or
800-328-1124

More Resources

Here is an excellent book about lifestyle and exercise changes for reducing risk:

Breast Fitness: An Optimal Exercise and Health Plan for Reducing your Risk of Breast Cancer by Anne McTiernan, MD, PhD, Julie Gralow, MD, and Lisa Talbott. St. Martins Press, 2001.

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