

# Cancers that strike women:

## *Curbing your risk*

**W**hen was the last time you had a Pap test or a mammogram? Do you smoke? Do you exercise? Do you have a family history of cancer? How many alcoholic beverages a day, if any, do you drink?

The answers to these and other questions may reveal your risk for the cancers that strike women. Read on to learn more about where you stand and how you can keep your personal risk in check.

### Breast Cancer

An estimated 193,000 breast cancer cases will be diagnosed this year, and more than 40,000 women will succumb to the disease. Yet much can be done to detect breast cancer early, and mounting evidence suggests that certain lifestyle habits, such as regular physical activity and limited use of alcohol, may help prevent the disease.

#### Risk factors:

- Increasing age
- Genetic mutations in the BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes
- A family history of breast cancer in first-line relatives before menopause
- Family history of breast or ovarian cancer
- Early onset of menstruation
- Late menopause
- Never having children or having a first child after age 30
- Obesity

#### Factors that may reduce your risk:

- Reaching and maintaining an ideal weight
- Eating a low-fat, high-fiber diet
- Limiting alcoholic beverages to one a day
  - Engaging in moderate physical activity
  - Discussing the benefits and risks of menopausal hormone therapy and the drug tamoxifen with your physician (for high-risk women only)

#### Prevention and early detection:

- Get a clinical breast exam beginning at age 25 as part of routine physical checkups.
- Get an annual mammogram beginning at age 40.
- If you have a family history of breast cancer, talk to your doctor about when you should start screening.
- Optional: Perform breast self-examinations monthly beginning at age 20.

*The following cancer screening guidelines are recommended for women at average risk for cancer (unless otherwise specified) and without any specific symptoms.*

### Ovarian Cancer

About 21,550 women are expected to develop ovarian cancer this year in the United States. Largely because it's difficult to detect in its early stages, ovarian cancer causes more deaths than any other cancer of the female reproductive system. A Pap test, while helpful in detecting cervical cancer, *does not* diagnose ovarian cancer.

#### Risk factors:

- Increasing age
- Never having children
- A family history of ovarian cancer
- A personal or family history of breast, colon or endometrial cancer
- A history of difficulty getting pregnant
- Genetic mutations in the BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes
- Being overweight

#### Factors that may reduce your risk:

- Discussing the use of oral contraceptives with your doctor
- Breastfeeding
- Eating a low-fat, high-fiber diet

#### Prevention and early detection:

- Get thorough pelvic exams starting at age 18 and then according to your doctor's recommendations.
- Report unexplainable indigestion, gas or bloating; swelling or pain in the abdomen; and pain during intercourse. Your physician may recommend additional tests to detect early-stage tumors.
- If you have a family history of cancer, talk to your doctor about when you should start screening.

### Cervical Cancer

Although cervical cancer strikes about 11,000 women each year, incidence of this slow-growing cancer has been decreasing steadily. What's more, having an annual Pap test has reduced the number of deaths from this disease in the past 40 years. A new vaccine is available to protect against the types of HPV (human papillomavirus, a sexually transmitted disease) most likely to cause cervical cancer.

#### Risk factors:

- Infection with HPV
- Smoking
- Sexual activity beginning at an early age
- Multiple sexual partners

#### Factors that may reduce your risk:

- Quitting tobacco use
- Practicing safe sex
- HPV vaccination

#### Prevention and early detection:

- Get regular Pap tests. The Pap test can detect HPV infection and precancerous conditions.
- Notify your gynecologist of any unusual vaginal discharge, abnormal vaginal bleeding or spotting, or bleeding or pain during intercourse.

### Endometrial Cancer

About 41,000 women in the United States were diagnosed with endometrial cancer (cancer of the uterine lining) last year. Although it's the most common cancer of the female reproductive system, it's also the most treatable.

#### Risk factors:

- Early onset of menstruation
- Late menopause
- Never having children or a history of failure to ovulate
- Use of menopausal hormone therapy without the addition of progesterone
- Being obese
- A family history of colon, ovarian or endometrial cancer

#### Factors that may reduce your risk:

- Eating a low-fat, high-fiber diet
- Reaching and maintaining a healthy weight
- Discussing the use of oral contraceptives with your doctor

#### Prevention and early detection:

- Get an annual pelvic exam.
- Report any abnormal bleeding to your physician as soon as possible. Abnormal bleeding is usually the earliest symptom of endometrial cancer. If you're premenopausal, any bleeding between periods or unusually heavy periods are considered abnormal. After menopause, any vaginal bleeding is abnormal.
- If you have a family history of cancer, talk to your doctor about when you should start screening.

### Cancer care that counts

➔ **More newly diagnosed cases of cancer are treated at Northside Hospital each year than at any other community hospital in Georgia. For more information, visit [northside.com](http://northside.com) or contact the Northside Hospital Cancer Care Program at (404) 851-8635.**