

Cancer Facts for Women

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India Cancer Initiative



The cancers that most often affect women are breast, cervical, oral, ovarian, endometrial, lung, and colon cancer. Knowing about these diseases and what you can do can save your life.

Breast cancer

Breast cancer is the most common cancer that women may face in their lifetime (except for skin cancer). It can occur at any age, but it is much more likely to occur after age 40 and as you get older. Some women – because of certain factors – may have a greater chance of having breast cancer than other women. But as you get older, you should know about breast cancer and what you can do about it.

What you can do

The best defence is to find breast cancer as early as possible, when it is easier to treat. Finding breast cancer early is called “early detection.” Here is what you can do to help find breast cancer early.

- Have a clinical breast exam by your doctor every three years during your 20s and 30s and every year starting at age 40.
- Report any breast change to your doctor without delay. Breast self-exam (BSE) is an option for women starting in their 20s.
- Talk to your doctor about whether you need a mammogram starting at age 40.

- If you have a family history of breast cancer or have had breast cancer before, be sure to tell your doctor about this history because you may need to have additional tests and start testing earlier. Your doctor also can explain the benefits and limits of screening tests.

Cervical cancer

Cervical cancer can affect any woman who is – or has been – sexually active. It is much more likely to occur in women who have – or have had – a virus called the human papilloma virus (HPV). This virus is passed on during sex. Cervical cancer is also more likely to occur in women who smoke, have HIV or AIDS, have poor nutrition, and who do not have regular Pap tests.

What you can do

A Pap test can find changes in the cervix that can be treated before they become cancer. The Pap test is also very effective in finding cervical cancer early, when it is highly curable. Here is what you can do to prevent cervical cancer or find it early:

- You should begin having Pap tests by age 30. Testing should be done every three years.
- If you are 50 years of age or older, you can be tested every 5 years.

- If you are 65 years of age and have had 2 negative Pap tests in a row, you do not need to be tested anymore, unless you have symptoms
- If you have had a hysterectomy with removal of the uterus and cervix, you may stop testing, unless the surgery was done as a treatment for cervical cancer. If you still have your cervix, you should still be tested.

Other tests used in India for cervical cancer include the VIA and VILI tests. Talk to your doctor about your options for cervical cancer testing.

Oral cancer

People who use tobacco are at the greatest risk for oral cancer. All types of tobacco use increase your risk for oral cancer, including smoking beedi or cigarettes; and chewing raw tobacco, gutkha, paan, and paan masala (with or without betal nut). This is one of the most common cancers in India. Women have been shown to be at a higher risk than men.

What you can do

Oral cancer can be detected in the early stages with an oral exam. Ask your doctor about how often you should have an oral exam. Quitting all types of tobacco use greatly reduces your risk for oral cancer. The best prevention is to avoid tobacco use altogether.

Ovarian cancer

Ovarian cancer is more likely to occur as women get older. Women who have never had children, who have unexplained infertility, or who had their first child after age 30 may be at increased risk for this cancer. Also, women who have used estrogen alone as hormone replacement therapy are at increased risk. Women who have a personal or family history of hereditary non-polyposis colon cancer, ovarian cancer, or breast cancer are also more likely to have this disease. Women who do not have any of these conditions can still have ovarian cancer.

What you can do

There are no effective and proven tests today for finding ovarian cancer early (like mammograms for breast cancer). There are some tests that might be used in women who have a high chance of having ovarian cancer. You should see a doctor right away if you have persistent symptoms of swelling of the abdomen, digestive problems (including gas, loss of appetite, and bloating), abdominal pain, feeling like you need to urinate all the time, pelvic pain, back pain, or leg pain. A pelvic exam should be a part of a woman's regular health exam.

Endometrial cancer

Endometrial cancer (cancer of the lining of the uterus) occurs most often in women aged 50 and older. Taking estrogen without progesterone, or taking tamoxifen for breast cancer treatment or to lower the risk for breast cancer, might increase a woman's chance for this disease.

Having an early onset of menstrual periods, late menopause, a history of infertility, or not having children can also increase the risk. Women with a personal or family history of hereditary non-polyposis colon cancer (HNPCC) or polycystic ovary disease, or those who are obese are also more likely to have endometrial cancer.

What you can do

Watch for signs and symptoms, such as unusual spotting or bleeding not related to menstrual periods, and report these to your doctor. Although the Pap test is very good at finding cancer of the cervix, it is not a reliable test for early diagnosis of endometrial cancer. You should be offered yearly testing with an endometrial biopsy beginning at age 35 if you have or are likely to have hereditary non-polyposis colon cancer.

Lung cancer

Smoking is the most common cause of lung cancer, but some people who do not smoke can also have lung cancer. Smoking is the cause for more than 80 percent of all lung cancers.

What you can do

Lung cancer is one of the few cancers that can often be prevented. If you are a smoker, ask your doctor or nurse how they can help you quit. If you don't smoke, don't start. If your friends and loved ones are smokers, help them quit. For help quitting, visit the American Cancer Society Web site at www.cancer.org.

Colon cancer

Any adult can have colon or rectal cancer, but most colon cancers are found in people aged 50 or older. People with a personal or family history of this cancer, or who have polyps in their colon or rectum, or those with inflammatory bowel disease are more likely to have colon cancer. Also, eating a diet mostly of high-fat foods (especially from animal sources), being overweight, smoking, and being inactive can make a person more likely to have colon cancer.

What you can do

Most colon cancers almost always start with a polyp. Testing can save lives by finding polyps before

they become cancerous. If precancerous polyps are removed, colon cancer can be prevented. Eating a low-fat diet that is rich in fruits and vegetables may also make you less likely to have colon cancer. Talk to your doctor about getting tested for colon cancer. Also, tell your doctor if you have close family members who have had colon cancer. You may need different tests started at an earlier age.

Other cancers

Stomach cancer and cancer of the esophagus are also common in India. There are no recommended screening tests for finding these cancers early. Most are diagnosed by the presence of symptoms.

What you can do

Always be alert for any of the following symptoms and if you do have a new symptom that does not go away, do not delay in talking with your doctor.

- Stomach cancer. The most common symptom is sudden weight loss without trying to lose weight and loss of appetite. You might also have indigestion, heartburn, nausea, or a vague discomfort in the stomach area.
- Cancer of the esophagus. The most common symptom is difficulty with swallowing that gets worse over time. Pain and weight loss can also occur.

The Best Defence against Cancer

Early detection – finding a cancer early before it has spread – gives you the best chance to do something about it. Knowing about these cancers and how they can be prevented or found early can save your life.

Take Control of Your Health and Reduce Your Cancer Risk

- Stay away from tobacco.
- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Get moving with regular physical activity.
- Eat healthy with plenty of fruits and vegetables.
- Avoid alcohol.
- Know yourself, your family history, and your risks.
- Have regular check-ups and cancer screening tests.

