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What Young Women Should Know About Breast Cancer

Learn what makes breast cancer different when you're younger, as well as symptoms of the disease and who is at risk.

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Generally speaking, the risk of breast cancer goes up with age. But although [breast cancer](#) is not as common in younger women, women of any age can get the disease.

[Rebecca H. Johnson, M.D.](#), who is now the medical director of the adolescent and young adult oncology program at Mary Bridge Children's Hospital in Tacoma, WA, was first diagnosed with breast cancer when she was in her 20s. More recently, when she was in her 40s, she developed cancer in the other breast.

“I was diagnosed at age 27, and I had no [family history of breast cancer](#),” says Dr. Johnson. “At the time, it seemed like lightning had struck,” because she was under the impression that breast cancer at such a young age was incredibly rare. Although breast cancer is far more common in women in their 60s and 70s, the risk of getting it when you’re much younger is not insignificant. About 5% of breast cancers are in women under age 40, reports the [Cleveland Clinic](#).

At age 30, women have a one in 204 chance of being diagnosed, according to the [National Cancer Institute](#). It’s one of the most common cancers in young adults, says Dr. Johnson. What’s more, incidence of breast cancer in women ages 15 to 39 has increased since 2004, according to a research review co-authored by Dr. Johnson and published in [JCO Oncology Practice](#).

BC in Young Women

How Breast Cancer Is Different in Young Women

When breast cancer is diagnosed at a young age, it’s more likely to be aggressive compared to when it’s found in older women, says [Kandice K. Ludwig, M.D.](#), the medical director of the breast program at the Schwarz Cancer Center at Indiana University Health North Hospital in Carmel.

Cancers found in younger women [tend to have different features](#) than those found in older women. For example, Dr. Johnson says that young women with breast cancer are more likely than their older counterparts to be diagnosed with “[triple-negative](#)” breast cancer. This means that the cancer cells don’t have receptors for the hormones estrogen or progesterone, and they don’t make too much of a [protein called HER2](#), either. That makes it more difficult to treat because triple-negative cancer doesn’t respond to specific medications that are designed to home in on estrogen, progesterone, or HER2.

Additionally, cancer in younger women is more apt to be a fast-growing type and more likely to have spread to other parts of the body (metastasized) by the time it’s diagnosed. “Young women who get diagnosed with breast cancer need to have whole-body screening to check for metastatic cancer,” says Dr. Johnson. “You can’t assume it’s only in the breast.”

Symptoms

Symptoms of Breast Cancer in Young Women

Some people with breast cancer don’t have any symptoms, especially when the cancer is in its earliest stages. But younger women very often find their own breast cancers, says Dr. Johnson. If you notice any of the following possible symptoms, the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) advises telling your doctor as soon as possible:

- A new lump in your breast or under your armpit
- Breast pain
- Change in size of the breast or position of the nipple (such as if it becomes inverted)
- Nipple discharge other than breast milk
- Thickening, swelling, or dimpling of the breast



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These issues don't necessarily mean that you have breast cancer, but it's smart to get checked out so that if it is cancer, it can be treated promptly.

Screening Guidelines

Should Young Women Screen for Breast Cancer?

Guidelines from the [U.S. Preventive Services Task Force](#) (USPSTF) advise that most women start getting screening mammograms at age 50. But new [draft guidelines](#) were recently issued to lower that age to 40. This would be in line with some other organizations, including [breastcancer.org](#), which recommend starting at age 40. Talk to your doctor about what starting age is right for you.

Despite a small percentage of young women who develop breast cancer, screening mammograms aren't recommended for most women younger than 40 because there's a high risk of false positives in younger women. If you have a family history of breast cancer or are at [higher risk](#) for another reason, however, ask your doctor about starting mammograms or other screening tests (such as ultrasounds or MRIs) earlier.

“If there is a family history of breast cancer before the age of 50, then we might recommend starting screening about 10 years before the youngest woman in your family was diagnosed,” says Dr. Ludwig.

Most cancer groups no longer recommend formal breast self-exams (they [haven't been shown to be effective](#)), but it's still important to know what your breasts normally look like and feel like so you can tell your doctor if something has changed, says Dr. Ludwig. So get familiar with your own breasts. “The focus now is on breast awareness,” she says.

Treatment

Treatment for Younger Women With Breast Cancer

[Breast cancer](#) is treated in young women the same way it is in older women, says Dr. Ludwig. The stage of the cancer and whether you're estrogen, progesterone, and/or HER2 positive or negative are more important factors than age when it comes to guiding treatment.

[Most early-stage breast cancers](#) are treated with a combination of surgery, radiation, and some kind of medicine (which could be chemotherapy, immunotherapy, hormonal therapy, and/or targeted therapy), says Dr. Ludwig. Younger women are more likely than older ones to have a mastectomy rather than a lumpectomy (meaning a full removal, rather than partial removal, of breast tissue). Sometimes it's a personal choice due to fear of recurrence, but in other instances the decision stems from having a large tumor or carrying a BRCA mutation (which greatly increases the risk of recurrence), she says.

Younger women are more apt to have larger tumors, as reported in the *JCO Oncology Paper*. They're also more likely to need extensive surgery under the arm to remove lymph nodes, Dr. Ludwig says. When an older woman is diagnosed with breast cancer that was caught on a routine mammogram, it tends to be smaller.

Young women who want to have children should discuss fertility-preserving options with their oncologist as well as a fertility specialist, Dr. Ludwig adds. The goal is to have any desired fertility preservation treatments, such as egg freezing, done before they start chemotherapy, which is usually possible.

If a woman is diagnosed with [metastatic breast cancer](#), she will be treated with medication that's tailored to the specifics of her cancer (including whether it's estrogen positive and how far it is spread), says Dr. Ludwig. That's true for women of all ages, but the good news for younger women is that they may still have decades ahead of them: “There are such great drugs now,” says Dr. Ludwig. “We have women who live 20 or 30 years with metastatic disease.”

While learning that you have breast cancer, especially at a young age, can be overwhelming, Dr. Johnson says it's important to know that others have walked the same path. Since her diagnoses, she's resolved to do whatever she can to stay as healthy as possible, in part by adopting a vegan diet. "Not smoking, exercising, and eating healthfully are things everyone can control."

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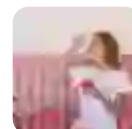
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