

Cancer Facts for Women

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Some of the cancers that most often affect women are breast, colorectal, lung, cervical, endometrial, ovarian, and skin. Knowing about these cancers and what you can do to help prevent them or find them early (when they are small, haven't spread, and might be easier to treat) may help save your life.

Breast cancer

[Breast cancer](#)¹ is the most common cancer in women in the US, except for skin cancer. It's also the second-leading cause of cancer death (after lung cancer). About 1 in 8 women will get invasive breast cancer in their lifetime.

It can occur at any age, but the risk goes up as you get older. Some women may have a greater chance of having breast cancer than others. But every woman should know about the risks for breast cancer and what they can do to help lower their risk.

What you can do

Get screened.

Getting regular screening tests is the best way to find breast cancer early, when it's small, hasn't spread, and might be easier to treat.

The American Cancer Society recommends the following for women at average risk for breast cancer:

- **Women ages 40 to 44** should have the choice to start yearly breast cancer screening with a mammogram (x-ray of the breast) if they wish to do so.
- **Women ages 45 to 54** should get a mammogram every year.
- **Women 55 and older** can switch to a mammogram every 2 years, or can continue yearly screening.

Screening should continue as long as a woman is in good health and is expected to live at least 10 more years.

If you're getting a mammogram for breast cancer screening, you should know:

- What to expect
- What the test can and can't do
- What your breasts normally look and feel like so you can tell a health care provider about any changes

Women at high risk for breast cancer – because of their family history, a genetic mutation, or other risk factors – should be screened with MRI along with a mammogram. Talk with a health care provider about your risk for breast cancer and the best screening plan for you.

Colorectal cancer

[Colorectal cancer](#)²(CRC) is cancer that starts in the colon or the rectum. Some factors that increase colorectal cancer risk include physical inactivity, a diet high in red and processed meats, excess body weight, smoking, alcohol use, and a personal or family history of colorectal cancer or polyps.

What you can do

Get screened.

Screening can help to find colorectal cancer early, when it's smaller, hasn't spread, and might be easier to treat. Most colorectal cancers starts with a polyp - a small growth in the colon or rectal. Removing a polyp can prevent it from ever becoming cancer.

The American Cancer Society recommends the following for people at average risk for colorectal cancer:

- **Everyone should start regular screening at age 45.**
- People who are in good health and with a life expectancy of more than 10 years should continue regular colorectal cancer screening **through age 75.**
- **For people ages 76 through 85**, the decision to be screened should be based on their preferences, life expectancy, health, and screening history.
- **People over age 85** should no longer get colorectal cancer screening.

Screening tests for colorectal cancer

Stool-based tests

- Fecal immunochemical test (FIT)* every year, **or**
- Guaiac-based fecal occult blood test (gFOBT)* every year, **or**
- Stool DNA test (MT-sDNA)* every 3 years

Visual exams of the colon and rectum

- Colonoscopy every 10 years, **or**
- CT colonography (virtual colonoscopy)* every 5 years, **or**
- Flexible sigmoidoscopy* every 5 years

*If a person gets screened with a test other than colonoscopy, any abnormal test result should be followed up with colonoscopy.

If you're at high risk of colorectal cancer based on family history or other factors, you may need to start screening before age 45, be screened more often, or get specific tests.

There are some differences between these tests to consider, **but the most important**

thing is to get screened, no matter which test you choose. Talk to a health care provider about which tests might be good options for you, and to your insurance provider about your coverage. If you don't have insurance or can't afford cancer screening, [find free and low-cost screening options.](#)³

Lung cancer

[Lung cancer](#)⁴ is the second most common type of cancer in women in the US and the leading cause of cancer death.

What you can do

Get screened.

The American Cancer Society recommends yearly lung cancer screening with a low-dose CT (LDCT) scan for people who:

- **Are ages 50 to 80 years** and smoke or used to smoke

AND

- **Have at least a 20 pack-year history of smoking** (A pack-year is equal to smoking 1 pack of cigarettes per day for a year. For example, a person could have a 20 pack-year history by smoking 1 pack a day for 20 years or by smoking 1 packs a day for 10 years.)

Before deciding to get screened, people should talk to their health care provider about the purpose of screening, how it's done, the benefits, limitations, and possible harms of screening. People who still smoke should be counseled about quitting and offered resources to help them quit.

Avoid tobacco and exposures.

Not all lung cancers are preventable. But there are things you can do to lower your risk.

- If you don't smoke, don't start. Avoid breathing in other people's smoke.
- If you smoke, call the American Cancer Society at 1-800-227-2345 or visit [Empowered to Quit](#)⁵ for help quitting.

While smoking tobacco is the leading cause of cancer, not all people who get lung cancer smoke. Other ways you can help lower your risk:

- Avoid all products with tobacco.
- Stay away from secondhand smoke.
- Avoid or limit exposure to cancer-causing chemicals that might be in the home or workplace.

Cervical cancer

Human papillomavirus (HPV) causes almost all [cervical cancers](#).⁶ HPV is a very common infection that can be spread during skin-to-skin contact with infected body parts, not just during sex. Most people don't know they have HPV and clear the virus on their own. But some types of HPV don't go away and cause cancer. **People of any gender or sexual orientation can get and spread HPV.**

What you can do

Get vaccinated.

HPV vaccination protects against the types of HPV that cause 90% of cervical cancers, as well as other cancers including vaginal, vulvar, penile, mouth, and throat.

The American Cancer Society recommends all children get the HPV vaccination between **ages 9 and 12**, when the vaccine works best. But children and young adults can still get the vaccine **up to age 26**.

Vaccination at the recommended ages will help prevent more cancers than vaccination at older ages. **If you're between the ages of 27 to 45**, talk to your doctor to find out if HPV vaccination might benefit you.

Get screened.

Having regular screening tests can help find changes in the cervix that can be treated before they become cancer. The tests for cervical cancer screening are the HPV test and the Pap test. HPV tests look for types of HPV that can cause precancers and cancers of the cervix. The Pap test looks at cells taken from the cervix to find changes that might be cancer or precancer. Regular screening can help find cervical cancer early, when it's small, has not spread, and might be easier to treat.

The American Cancer Society recommends the following for people who have a cervix and are at average risk for cervical cancer:

- **Cervical cancer testing should start at age 25.** People under age 25 should not be tested.
- **People between the ages of 25 and 65** should get a primary HPV test every 5 years. A primary HPV test is an HPV test that is done by itself for screening. If you can't get a primary HPV test, get a co-test (HPV test with a Pap test) every 5 years or a just a Pap test every 3 years. **The most important thing to remember is to get screened regularly, no matter which test you choose.**
- **People over age 65** who have had regular cervical cancer testing in the past 10 years with normal results should not be tested for cervical cancer. Once testing is stopped, it shouldn't be restarted again. If you have a history of a serious cervical precancer, you should continue to get tested for at least 25 years after that diagnosis, even if this means testing goes past age 65.
- **People who have had a total hysterectomy (removal of the uterus and cervix)** should stop testing unless the surgery was done to treat cervical cancer or a serious precancer.

People who have been vaccinated against HPV should still follow the screening recommendations for their age group.

Endometrial cancer

[Endometrial cancer](#)⁷ is a cancer of the endometrium (the inner lining of the uterus). The risk of endometrial cancer increases with age. The American Cancer Society recommends that at the time of menopause, all women should be told about the risks and symptoms of endometrial cancer. They should report any unusual vaginal bleeding or spotting to a health care provider.

What you can do

Know your risk and the signs.

There are no screening tests or exams to find endometrial cancer early in women who are at average risk and have no symptoms. Studies show many cases of endometrial cancer are linked to excess body weight and lack of physical activity and therefore might be preventable.

Other things that increase risk for endometrial cancer include:

- Taking hormones
- Having an early onset of menstrual periods or late menopause
- A personal history of infertility or not having children
- A personal or family history of hereditary non-polyposis colorectal cancer (HNPCC or Lynch syndrome) or polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS)
- A personal history of breast or ovarian cancer

The most common symptoms of endometrial cancer are abnormal bleeding or spotting, especially in postmenopausal women. Belly pain or pain while peeing or during sex can also be symptoms.

If you're at high risk

The American Cancer Society recommends that **women who have (or may have) hereditary non-polyposis colorectal cancer (HNPCC or Lynch syndrome) be offered yearly testing with an endometrial biopsy starting at age 35.**

Women should talk to a health care provider about their risk for endometrial cancer and about getting regular pelvic exams. It's important to know the Pap test is very good at finding cancer of the cervix. Sometimes it can find some early endometrial cancers, but it's not a test for endometrial cancer.

Ovarian cancer

The most important risk factor for [ovarian cancer](#)⁸ other than age is a family history of breast or ovarian cancer. This includes those with inherited gene changes like *BRCA1*, *BRCA2*, and Lynch syndrome.

What you can do

Know your risk and the signs.

Currently, there are no recommended cancer screening tests for women who are not at increased risk of ovarian cancer.

Some women at high risk because of a strong family history or inherited gene changes might consider [preventive surgery](#)⁹. If you have an increased risk, talk to a health care provider about whether there are tests that might be right for you.

Some other things that increase risk for ovarian cancer include:

- Taking hormones
- Cigarette smoking
- Excess body weight

Signs and symptoms of ovarian cancer can include:

- Belly swelling with weight loss
- Gas, bloating, and loss of appetite
- Belly or pelvic pain
- Feeling like you need to pee all the time

If you have these symptoms daily for more than a few weeks, talk to a health care provider.

Skin cancer

[Skin cancer](#)¹⁰ is the most common type of cancer in the US. Anyone of any skin tone can get skin cancer. It's also one of the easiest cancers to prevent or find early.

Ultraviolet (UV) radiation from the sun causes most skin cancers. Tanning booths and sun lamps also expose you to UV rays that can cause cancer.

What you can do

Be safe in the sun.

Practicing sun safety is one of the most important things you can do to lower your risk of skin cancer.

- Limit time in the sun, especially between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. when the sun's rays are strongest.
- Use a broad-spectrum sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 30 on exposed skin **all year round**. Reapply sunscreen every 2 hours or after swimming or sweating (even if it's waterproof).
- Wear protective clothing, sunglasses that have UV protection, and a hat.
- Avoid tanning beds and sun lamps.

Check your skin.

The best way to catch skin cancer early is to check your skin for changes. Many health care providers suggest checking your skin about once a month.

- Know what all moles and spots on your skin normally look like and report any changes to a health care provider right away.
- Ask about having a skin exam done during your regular health checkups.

What else you can do to help reduce your cancer risk

Almost half of all adult cancers might be prevented by things we can do or change.

- Stay away from tobacco.
- Be as physically active as you can.
- Eat more nutritious foods including fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Avoid or limit processed foods, red meat, sugary drinks, and refined grains.
- It's best not to drink alcohol. If you do drink, have no more than 1 drink per day for women.
- Protect your skin from the sun.
- Know yourself, your family history, and your risks.
- Get regular checkups and recommended cancer screening tests.

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/breast-cancer.html
2. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/colon-rectal-cancer.html
3. www.cancer.org/cancer/screening/get-screened.html
4. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/skin-cancer.html
5. www.cancer.org/cancer/risk-prevention/tobacco/empowered-to-quit.html
6. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/cervical-cancer.html
7. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/endometrial-cancer.html
8. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/ovarian-cancer.html
9. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/breast-cancer/risk-and-prevention/preventive-

[surgery-to-reduce-breast-cancer-risk.html](#)

10. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/skin-cancer.html

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