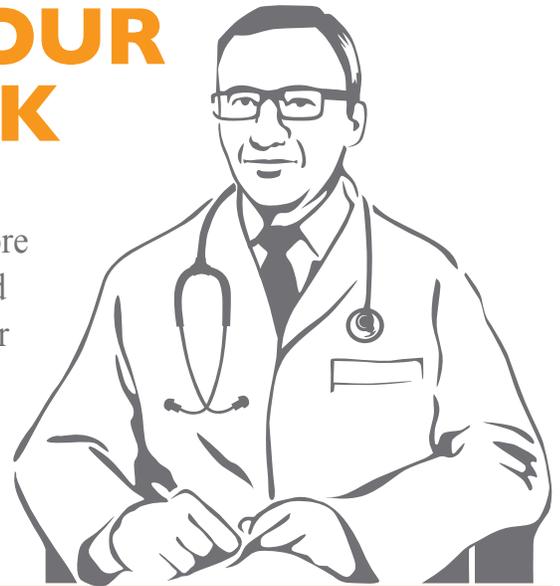


WELLNEWS

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UNDERSTANDING YOUR BREAST CANCER RISK

According to the National Cancer Institute, one in eight U.S. women will develop breast cancer during their lifetime. Even more women have loved ones and family members who have struggled with breast cancer. It's important to understand how breast cancer among family affects your own risk, but this information is often filled with numbers and medical terms. We've laid out the most important risk factors, plain and simple.



The Factors:

First Degree Family

That is, parents, siblings, and children. Studies show that women whose mothers or sisters have had breast cancer are more likely to develop it themselves. This is the most crucial factor in learning one's risk, but think immediate family: cancer in grandparents or more distant relatives affects your risk much less. Interestingly, about 1 percent of all breast cancer cases in the United States occur in men. If a male in your family has had breast cancer, it likely means there's a strong family pattern, putting you at greater risk.

What About Genetics?

A family history of breast cancer has to do with shared family genes. Genes are the blueprint for how our bodies look and operate, and we received a mix from our parents. Sometimes mutation occurs in genes, a random change that can then be passed down to children. Mutation in certain genes relates to the formation of breast cancer, with the BRCA 1 and 2 genes being most responsible. Tests can reveal whether these two genes, among a handful of others, are a cause of breast cancer in your family.

Family Breast Cancer Before or After Menopause

If breast cancer in your family member occurred after menopause, it has less effect on your risk. It's all about hormones, the natural chemicals in the body that control its growth and functions. Some of these relate to the formation of breast cancer. Mothers and daughters are chemically similar, but after menopause, hormones slow down. This means that breast cancer at a later age is not so related to family risk.

What To Do Next

If you feel you are at higher risk for breast cancer, take initiative and talk to your doctor about additional, preventive treatments. After a gene test, your doctor may also recommend genetic counseling, a professional look at your family history and guidance in taking the next steps. Paired with regular exams, screening options such as MRI and ultrasound can also help identify cancer in its early stages.

In extreme cases of risk, prophylactic mastectomy, or removal of the breast tissue via surgery, can be done as a preventive measure—a popular topic since celebrity Angelina Jolie underwent the operation last year. Not all options are for everyone, though. Discuss with your doctor to determine the most appropriate action for your unique situation.



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