

Young Women & Breast Cancer

Why do “young” women get breast cancer?

When it comes to breast cancer, “young” usually means anyone younger than 40 years old. Breast cancer is less common among women in this age group. In 2005, less than 5 percent of all breast cancer cases occurred in women under age 40.¹

However, women who are diagnosed at a younger age are more likely to have a mutated BRCA1 or BRCA2 gene. These genes are important in the development of breast cancer, and women who carry defects on either of these genes are at greater risk of developing breast and ovarian cancer. If a woman carries a defective BRCA1 or BRCA2 gene, she may have a 50 to 85 percent chance of developing breast cancer in her lifetime. In addition, having a mother, daughter or sister who has or had breast cancer also increases a young woman’s risk of developing breast cancer. So while the risk of breast cancer is generally much lower for younger women, there is still a high risk for some.

If you are concerned about your genetic risk, ask your doctor to refer you to a genetic counselor or a breast cancer specialist who will discuss in detail what your own risk may be and can talk about genetic testing and prevention options.

Diagnosing breast cancer in younger women can be more difficult because their breast tissue is often thicker than the breast tissue of older women. By the time a lump can be felt in a younger woman, it is often large enough and advanced enough to lower her chances of survival. In addition, the cancer may be more aggressive and less responsive to hormone therapies. Delay of diagnosis in younger women is a special problem because it is so rare for a younger woman to get the disease. As a result, younger women are often told that a lump is just a cyst and to wait and watch it. Tell your doctor if you notice a change in



If you have had breast cancer, you still may be able to have children.

either of your breasts, and think about getting a second opinion if you are not satisfied with his or her advice.

1 American Cancer Society, Breast Cancer Facts & Figures 2005-2006.

A helpful tip for young women

Clinical breast exams are recommended for all women beginning at the age of 20, at least every three years, or every year if you are age 40 or over. If you are under age 40 with a family history or other risk factors you should talk with your health care provider about risk assessment, when to start getting mammograms and how often to have them.

It is important for younger women to become familiar with how their breasts look and feel through monthly breast self-exams (BSE) beginning by age 20. The best time to perform BSE is just as your monthly period ends or on the same day of each month if you don’t have regular periods. During BSE, if you discover a lump or notice any changes in your breasts, see your health care provider for a clinical breast exam. (For step-by-step breast self-exam instructions, go to www.komen.org/bse.)

Hearing the pitter-patter of little feet?

Some treatments for breast cancer can affect a woman's ability to have children. If you think you would like to become a parent after breast cancer, talk with your doctor about your options before deciding on treatment.

In the past, doctors would advise women who have had breast cancer not to have children. Doctors thought that the added estrogen and progesterone during pregnancy may promote the growth of breast cancer. Yet, there are no studies that have clearly shown a link between pregnancy and recurrence of breast cancer. Today, many doctors say it is fine for women who are free of cancer and not undergoing treatment to become pregnant. Some suggest waiting 2 to 5 years after diagnosis — the most likely period of recurrence — to assure that breast cancer has not returned.

Some women around age 40 who are closer to menopause find that after chemotherapy, their periods do not return. For those who are in their 20s and 30s and who still have their periods after chemotherapy, the ability to have children may be unaffected. If you are hoping to have children after cancer treatment, talk with your doctor about your options.

For mothers with breast cancer

If you are a mother of young children and you have breast cancer, it can be hard to tell your children what you are going through. Remember that children can pick up on their parents' feelings, and may be confused if you do not talk to them about your condition. Telling your children in simple terms about your cancer and sharing some of your feelings will help them understand the changes around them. Every mother is different, and your parenting style may be different from someone else's. But in your own way, try to share with your children what you are going through.

Also, trying to maintain your usual routine may help your children adjust to the changes. Talking about your breast cancer can help both you and your children be supportive and cope with the disease.

Resources

Young women with breast cancer may have special concerns that are different from those of older women. Finding the right support group can bring strength and friendship through sharing your thoughts and feelings. Many larger hospitals have or can refer you to cancer support groups in your area. Or you can contact these organizations for more information:

Organizations

Susan G. Komen for the Cure
1-877 GO KOMEN, www.komen.org for these booklets:
What's happening to me?
What's happening to the woman I love?
What's happening to mom?
What's happening to the woman we love?

American Cancer Society
1-800-ACS-2345
www.cancer.org

Fertile Hope
1-888-994-HOPE
www.fertilehope.org

Young Survival Coalition
1-646-257-3000
www.youngsurvival.org

Y-ME National Breast Cancer Organization
1-800-221-2141
www.y-me.org

Related fact sheets in this series:

- Genetics & Breast Cancer
- Talking With Your Children
- When You Discover A Lump