

Breast Cancer Q&A

Novant Health breast surgical oncologist, Dr. Lori Gentile

Considering that 1 in 8 women will be diagnosed with breast cancer in their lifetimes, and many more touched by it affecting friends and family, it is important that everyone is informed.

How is breast cancer most often diagnosed??

Many breast cancers have no noticeable symptoms at all, which is why screening is so important. About 1 in 8 women, roughly 12 percent, will be diagnosed with an invasive breast cancer in her lifetime. Being diagnosed with breast cancer is still all too common and scary. For many women, the only reason they found out about their cancer was through routine screening. RCTs have shown that breast cancer screening and early detection reduces breast cancer mortality from 24-49%.

What is the benefit of finding breast cancer at an early stage?

Breast cancer mortality, or dying from breast cancer, is based on the stage (or how much disease is present in the body). For example, early stage cancers have a 98-99% 5 year survival rate, whereas, later stage cancers that have already spread to the lymph nodes have 5 year survival rates around 85%, and survival rates are much lower when cancer has already spread to other parts of the body at the time of diagnosis.

For breast cancers that aren't detected by screening, how do they present?

Some breast cancers do present warning signs. If symptoms are present, breast cancer can present with a change to the breast, including a palpable mass in the breast or under the arm, nipple retraction or new nipple discharge, skin thickening or skin discoloration. Being able to detect these changes requires women to be familiar with their breasts; hence, they're often encouraged by doctors to conduct monthly breast self-examinations to look for any changes.

Can maintaining a healthy weight reduce your breast cancer risk?

Being overweight or obese — especially after menopause — may raise your cancer risks. The risk of overweight women developing breast cancer after menopause is 1.5 times higher than in lean women. Obese women are at twice the risk of lean women.

To keep your cancer risk low, avoid weight gain by eating healthy foods and staying active. Stick with a plant-based diet rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains and beans. And, try to fit in at least 30 minutes of physical activity in your day. Exercise reduces breast cancer risk for women of all body types — even lean women, according to Leslie Bernstein, Ph.D., director of cancer etiology at City of Hope. While the American Cancer Society recommends 150 minutes of moderate intensity exercise per week to manage risk, for some, even 30 minutes per week has been found to be beneficial, Bernstein's research has found.

When should a woman contact their doctor??

There is great variation across women in how breast tissue looks and feels. Breasts can vary wildly depending on a woman's weight, age, genetics and hormonal profile, so it's important to know what's normal for you. The only way to do that is to get familiar with your breasts by checking them regularly and noticing how they change over time. Although 80% of breast lumps are benign, they should always be checked out by a doctor.

At what age should women begin checking their breasts for lumps and/or changes?

Younger women should get to know their breasts as well, as younger women are more likely to present with these changes because they have not yet started to undergo screening, and over 10,000 breast cancers each year are diagnosed in women less than 40 years old, most of which have not yet started undergoing mammography screening.

Visit [NovantHealth.org/GoPink](https://www.novanthealth.org/GoPink) to schedule a mammogram.