



Breast Cancer in Young Women - Facts

- Breast cancer is the leading cause of cancer death in women ages 15 to 54.
- There are more than 250,000 women 40 and under in the U.S. living with breast cancer, and over 11,100 young women under age 40 will be diagnosed in the next year and more than 1,100 will die.
- One in every 229 women between the ages of 30 and 39 will be diagnosed with breast cancer within the next 10 years.
- There are more than 250,000 women living in the United States today who were age 40 or under when they were diagnosed with breast cancer.
- Diagnosing breast cancer in younger women (under 40 years old) is more difficult because their breast tissue is generally denser than the breast tissue in older women. By the time a lump in a younger woman's breast can be felt, the cancer often is often large enough and advanced enough to lower her chances of survival
- Breast cancer in younger women may be aggressive and less likely to respond to treatment.
- Delays in diagnosing breast cancer also are a problem. Many younger women who have breast cancer ignore the warning signs -- such as a breast lump or unusual discharge -- because they believe they are too young to get breast cancer. Young women are often diagnosed at a later stage. Some health care providers also dismiss breast lumps in young women as cysts and adopt a "wait and see" approach.
- There are higher mortality rates for young women, particularly for African-Americans and Latinas.
- There is very little research or educational material focused on issues unique to this younger population, such as fertility, pregnancy, genetic predisposition, the impact of hormonal status on the effectiveness of treatment, psycho-social and long-term survivorship issues.
- As the incidence of young women with breast cancer is much lower than in older women, young women are an underrepresented population in many research studies.
- 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. 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 30 to 85 percent chance of developing breast cancer in her lifetime.

- Although breast cancer may not be prevented, early detection and prompt treatment can significantly improve a woman's chances of surviving breast cancer. More than 90 percent of women whose breast cancer is found in an early stage will survive.
- It is important to know how your breasts normally look and feel. Breast self-exam (BSE) is a tool that may help you learn what is normal for you.
- Clinical breast exams are recommended for all women beginning at the age of 20 at least every three years or every year for women age 40 or over. Women under age 40 with a family history or other risk factors should talk with her health care provider about risk assessment, when to start getting mammograms and how often to have them.
- In general, regular mammograms are not recommended for women under 40 years old, in part, because breast tissue tends to be more dense in young women, making mammograms less effective as a screening tool. However, screening mammograms may be recommended for younger women with a family history of breast cancer and other risk factors.
- Treatment options include surgery: either a lumpectomy, which involves removing the lump and some surrounding tissue, or a mastectomy, which is the removal of a breast. Radiation therapy is generally used following a lumpectomy, and chemotherapy and/or hormone therapy often are recommended after surgery to help destroy any remaining cancer cells and prevent recurrence.
- Breast cancer poses other challenges for younger women, as well, such as sexuality, fertility and pregnancy after breast cancer treatment.
- Many young women and their doctors are unaware that they are at risk for breast cancer. When women learn at a young age about the risks and benefits of detecting breast cancer early, they are more likely to follow the recommendations regarding clinical exams and mammograms. Young women also need to understand their risk factors and be able to discuss breast health with their health care providers. Young women need to become advocates for their own health and become educated about breast cancer.

General Breast Cancer Facts

- Breast cancer is the most common cancer among women in the United States, other than skin cancer. It is the second leading cause of cancer death in women, after lung cancer.
- About 182,460 women in the United States will be found to have invasive breast cancer in 2008. About 40,480 women will die from the disease this year. Right now there are about two and a half million breast cancer survivors in the United States.
- The chance of a woman having invasive breast cancer some time during her life is about 1 in 8. The chance of dying from breast cancer is about 1 in 35. Breast cancer death rates are going down. This is probably the result of finding the cancer earlier and improved treatment.