



9 Habits

Breast Cancer Experts
Want You to Know

See what those in the know—from oncologists and breast surgeons to Pilates instructors and survivors—are doing to reduce their risk of this deadly disease.

by A.J. Hanley

Ask any group of women about the health problem they fear most, and you're likely to hear a chorus of "breast cancer!" And who can blame us for pinpointing a disease that will claim more than 40,000 deaths this year alone? If that weren't enough, there's that oft-repeated stat—one in eight women will develop breast cancer in her lifetime—to keep us feeling uneasy about the future.

But as scary as these numbers sound, there's actually a lot of good news about breast cancer these days. Mortality rates have been decreasing steadily since 1990, thanks to improved detection and treatment options, and increased awareness about the disease. If caught early, the five-year survival rate is more than 95 percent. Plus, mounting research shows there are many things you can do to tip the odds in your favor. "You can't change your age or genetics [two of the major risk factors], but you can control certain lifestyle factors, such as exercise and what you eat and drink," says Stephanie Bernik, MD, chief of surgical oncology at Lenox Hill Hospital in NYC. There's no downside, she adds, since these behaviors will benefit your overall well-being as well.

We went to those on the front lines—from cancer specialists like Dr. Bernik to Pilates pros who have firsthand knowledge of the disease. Their tips will help boost your chances of maintaining your breast health.

1. WATCH YOUR WEIGHT.

Carrying extra pounds around does more than force you out of your skinny jeans—it triggers estrogen production. "High circulating levels of the estrogen hormone can increase the risk of diagnosis and recurrence of breast cancer," says Doreen Puglisi, MS, an exercise physiologist and founder of the Pink Ribbon Program, an exercise-based therapy plan aimed at survivors.

And that risk increases as you get older: Middle-aged women who gain as little as two pounds a year have a 9 percent greater chance of a breast cancer diagnosis by age 50 than those whose weight stays stable, according to research published last year in the *International Journal of Cancer*. "After menopause, the majority of estrogen is produced in the fatty tissues," explains M. Lisa Attebery, DO,

a breast surgeon in Paoli, PA. "Hence, the more fatty tissue, the higher the estrogen environment."

Puglisi, who underwent treatment for breast cancer 10 years ago, now maintains a healthy weight to reduce her risk of recurrence, which studies have shown can increase when a woman is overweight.

"Instead of being a slave to the scale, I focus on how my clothes fit," says Tara Roscioli, a Pilates teacher and the co-owner of The Align Wellness Studio in Millburn, NJ. "If they start to feel tight, I know I need to get back to clean eating."

2. DO A BACKGROUND CHECK.

Knowing your family's medical history can help you and your doctor devise a prevention plan. "My mother and maternal grandmother were diagnosed with breast cancer at a relatively young age—which





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puts me at a higher-than-average risk of developing it myself," says Halle Moore, MD, an oncologist at the Cleveland Clinic in OH. "However, it's not the very high risk linked with a family history of BRCA-associated breast cancer. Women who test positive for that genetic mutation are candidates for more intensive screening and even preventive surgeries."

When visiting loved ones, ask about breast cancer in the family. Having one first-degree relative—a mother, sister or daughter—with a diagnosis may double your odds. But also look at your second-degree relatives, like your grandmothers, aunts and cousins. If there's a lot of cancer in general, it could be a red flag for genetic mutations, says Dr. Bernik. In that case, you should meet with a genetic counselor to determine whether your history warrants a DNA test. (Find a counselor at www.nsgc.org.)

3. NIX THE NICOTINE.

"Studies associating smoking with a higher breast cancer risk

have been mixed," Dr. Moore says. Still, there are plenty of other reasons to stop puffing—among them, lung cancer, stroke and heart disease.

"I quit smoking before I had my son," Roscioli says. "After watching my father die as a result of COPD and emphysema three years ago, I also do everything possible to even avoid secondhand smoke." Need help putting down the butts? Go to www.smokefree.gov, which offers a free quit plan, educational materials and referrals to local resources.

4. GET MOVING.

"Four mornings a week, I jog or do a resistance-based workout with a trainer," says Paula Klein, MD, an oncologist at Mount Sinai Beth Israel and Mount Sinai St. Luke's Roosevelt Hospitals in NYC. "And because I live in Manhattan, I walk everywhere."

It all adds up: Research shows that staying active can reduce your breast cancer risk by up to 20 percent. As a result, the American Cancer Society and many doctors

recommend that women exercise regularly—about four to five hours per week at a moderate intensity level. (Brisk walking fits the moderate-intensity bill.) Staying active bolsters your immune system and keeps the pounds from piling on.

Pilates pros recommend combining the method with other activities. "Because it's easy on the joints, Pilates is a very sustainable form of exercise," says Jill Hinson, owner of Core Studio Pilates and Yoga in Monroe, NC. She complements her Pilates practice with two weekly yoga classes and three HIIT (high-intensity interval training) sessions that incorporate running stairs and stationary cycling. "I've learned that cross-training keeps my mind and my body from getting bored."

Puglisi stays fit with lots of cardio exercise, including hiking, rock-climbing and Rollerblading. It was Pilates, however, that helped her get back on her feet during her recovery from breast cancer. "It's a gentle, low-impact exercise that helps patients regain strength, endurance and range of motion," she says.

5. VARY YOUR DIET.

Although being overweight or obese increases breast cancer risk, studies on dietary factors—such as fat, fiber and fruits and vegetables—and their ability to reduce your chances of getting the disease have been less conclusive. And while breast cancer is less common in countries where the typical diet is low in total fat and saturated fat, experts aren't able to explain why.

That's not to say you shouldn't aim to eat better. For overall health, most experts advise eating a variety of vitamin-rich whole foods, and limiting your intake of red and processed meats. "I try to stick to a fairly low-fat

diet that's high in fruits and vegetables," says Dr. Klein.

6. BE A BUZZKILL.

Knocking back a few cocktails every night won't do you any favors, health-wise, especially if you've got a predisposition to breast cancer. Alcohol can increase levels of estrogen and other hormones associated with hormone-receptor-positive breast cancer. Women who have three alcoholic beverages per week have a 15 percent higher risk of breast cancer, and that risk rises 10 percent with each additional drink you have each day.

"I don't abstain from alcohol, but I drink in moderation," Dr. Moore says. "There are cardiovascular benefits to moderate alcohol consumption, so two to three drinks per week seems a reasonable balance." (One drink equals 12 ounces of beer, 5 ounces of wine or 1.5 ounces of hard liquor.)

7. MAKE A MAMMO DATE.

While there's been an ongoing debate regarding its effectiveness for cancer prevention, the guidelines haven't changed: "Age 40 is still the baseline for a mammogram," says Dr. Attebery, who gets one yearly, along with an annual clinical breast exam, and continues to recommend that strategy to otherwise healthy patients. "Mammograms have their limits (and will be replaced by 3D mammography soon), but they're the best screening modality we have right now."

To help her remember, Puglisi schedules her mammogram around her birthday each year, while Roscioli always chooses a day in January. For an additional nudge, sign up for an email reminder at www.komen.org/reminder.

8. GET TO KNOW THE GIRLS.

For many of the same reasons, the medical community remains divided on the subject of breast self-exams. "There are a lot of false positives," Dr. Bernik says. "Still, it's a good thing to do,

especially for younger women who are not being screened [by mammograms]." About 80 percent of breast cancers not found during mammography are discovered by the women themselves. She advises doing a check in the shower the same time each month—preferably in the last few days of your period.

One person who needs no convincing is Mona Melms, a Pilates instructor in Madison, WI. It was during a breast self-exam in the shower that the nurse and mother of two discovered a pea-size lump. "I was certain it was a fluid-filled cyst, but the biopsy said stage-3 breast cancer."

Cancer-free for more than two decades, Melms continues to do regular self-exams. "Get to know your body with all of its nuances and imperfections," she says. "Stand in front of the mirror, lift your arms and inspect and feel the breast tissue. Are you lumpy and bumpy or soft and smooth? Are there variations in size or color?" You may not notice when there's a change if you don't know what's normal for you, which is why it's important to do self-exams regularly.

9. TURN IN EARLIER.

"I'm in bed at 8:30 every night," Dr. Attebery says. "If I didn't have to be at work in the morning, I'd sleep 10 hours!" Skimping on zzz's can create a surge of adrenaline that's converted to estrogen, she explains. And studies show that over time, sleeplessness creates an inflammatory response in the body, which can promote tumor growth.

"Sleep is a valuable commodity that heals and rejuvenates body and soul," says Melms, who admits that her aim of seven hours a night often falls short.

Roscioli's strategy is to unplug: "Technology can overstimulate my brain, so I've been shutting down my electronics at least an hour before bedtime—no phone, no TV and no computer." If that doesn't work, she says, some diffused lavender essential oil will generally lull her into sleep mode. **PS**

AN EQUAL-OPPORTUNITY DISEASE:

Breast Cancer in MEN



It's likely it's a benign cyst or fatty mass, but visit your doctor to be sure.

Think pink is just for girls? Admittedly, it's pretty rare—about 100 times less common—but men aren't immune to breast cancer: An estimated 2,350 will be diagnosed this year, and 440 will die from the disease.

"While the risk factors for breast cancer in men are similar to those in women, there's more likely to be a genetic component," says Halle Moore, MD. About 20 percent of the cases in men are inherited, compared to 5 to 10 percent of breast cancers in women. As with all cancers, early detection can improve the prognosis, but that can be a challenge, she says. "While a lump may be more obvious in the small breast of a man, cancer is often diagnosed at a later stage." She attributes this to the fact that men aren't screened regularly and aren't usually educated about what to look for.

If you have a strong family history of breast cancer, a monthly self-exam is a good idea. Feel for lumps or a thickening of the breast tissue. Examine the area for changes in size, color or discharge. If you find something, it's likely it's a benign cyst or fatty mass, but visit your doctor to be sure.