

Young Women & Breast Cancer

Why do “young” women get breast cancer?

Breast cancer is not common among young women. In the United States, fewer than five percent of all breast cancer cases occur in women under 40.

Women with breast cancer at a young age are more likely to have a BRCA1 or BRCA2 gene mutation. Women who have a gene mutation are at increased risk of breast and ovarian cancer. If a woman has a BRCA1 or BRCA2 mutation, she may have a 50 to 70 percent chance of developing breast cancer by age 70. Having a family history of breast cancer at a younger age also increases a younger woman’s risk.

If you are concerned about your risk, talk with your doctor about seeing a genetic counselor. They can discuss your risk and see if genetic testing may be right for you. If you are at higher risk of breast cancer, talk with your doctor. There may be special breast cancer screening tests (like breast MRI) and risk-lowering options for you.

Detection and diagnosis in young women

Delayed diagnosis of breast cancer in young women is a problem. Breast cancer in young women can be hard to diagnose. Their breast tissue is often more dense than breast tissue of older women. Also, by the time a lump can be felt in a young woman, it may be large and advanced enough to lower her chances of survival. And, a young woman may even be told to wait and watch a lump. These cancers may also be more aggressive and hormone receptor-negative. This type of breast cancer does not respond to hormone therapy. These tumors may require chemotherapy.

Tell your provider if you notice any change in your breasts. Don’t be afraid to get a second opinion.



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

A helpful tip for young women

One of the Susan G. Komen® breast self-awareness messages is to have a clinical breast exam at least every three years beginning at age 20, and every year beginning at age 40. If you are under age 40 with a family history or other risk factors, talk with your provider about your risk of breast cancer. Talk about when and how often to get a mammogram or other screening tests.

Get to know how your breasts normally look and feel. See your provider if you notice any of these breast changes:

- Lump, hard knot or thickening inside the breast or underarm area
- Swelling, warmth, redness or darkening of the breast
- Change in the size or shape of the breast
- Dimpling or puckering of the skin
- Itchy, scaly sore or rash on the nipple
- Pulling in of your nipple or other parts of the breast
- Nipple discharge that starts suddenly
- New pain in one spot that doesn’t go away

Breast cancer treatment and fertility

Some treatments for breast cancer can affect the ability to have children. If a woman is close to her natural menopause, it is more likely chemotherapy will bring on early menopause. If you think you might want to have children after being treated for breast cancer, talk to your doctor and a fertility specialist before starting treatment to discuss options.

Even in women whose periods return, treatment can shorten the window of time to have children. Because of the danger of birth defects, women should not become pregnant while taking tamoxifen (given up to five years).

There used to be some concern that the high levels of hormones in the body during pregnancy could cause breast cancer to return. The good news is that being pregnant after treatment for breast cancer does not seem to lower rates of survival. There are many issues for survivors to consider when thinking about getting pregnant. Talk to your doctor if you want to become pregnant.

For mothers with breast cancer

If you are a mother of young children and have breast cancer, it can be hard to explain. Remember, children can pick up on their parents' feelings. They may be confused if you do not talk to them about what is going on. Tell your children about your breast cancer in an age-appropriate way. Let them know what they can expect. Share your feelings. It will help them understand the changes around them.

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, try to maintain your normal routine. This may help your children adjust to the changes. Talk about your breast cancer. It can help both you and your children cope.

Support

Young breast cancer survivors may have unique concerns that differ from 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:

Susan G. Komen®
1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636)
www.komen.org

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

Fertile Hope
1-866-965-7205
www.fertilehope.org

Young Survival Coalition®
1-877-972-1011
www.youngsurvival.org

The Komen message boards offer online forums for young breast cancer survivors to share their experiences and advice with other survivors.
<https://apps.komen.org/Forums/>

Related fact sheets in this series:

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

The above list of resources is only a suggested resource and is not a complete listing of breast cancer materials or information. The information contained herein is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or to replace the services of a medical professional. Komen does not endorse, recommend or make any warranties or representations regarding the accuracy, completeness, timeliness, quality or non-infringement of any of the materials, products or information provided by the organizations referenced herein.