


[BREAST CANCER]

assess YOUR RISK

We hear so much about breast cancer, but we might not know how to gauge and address our chances of developing the disease. Here's what you need to know about the most common risk factors.

 On February 11, 2020, I went for my annual breast screening,

anticipating the usual clean bill of health. My mammogram was fine, but the ultrasound—another test my doctor orders for me since I have dense breasts, which is a risk factor—caught a suspicious dot, which turned out to be cancer. Thankfully, it was caught early and contained, and I'm now cancer-free.

What surprised me in talking to my friends was none of them had ever had an ultrasound or even knew if they had dense breasts.

Given that about 1 in 8 women will develop breast cancer, it's imperative that we go to our doctors armed with questions to get the information we need to help prevent or, as in my case, catch breast cancer in its early stages.

understanding the factors

► What is my risk of breast cancer?

Simply having risk factors doesn't mean you'll develop breast cancer; however, you need to know how much each risk factor impacts you. Here are the top two to discuss with your doctor.

Age Breast cancer risk begins to rise at age 40 and increases with age, says Richard W. Reitherman, M.D., Ph.D., director of breast imaging at MemorialCare Breast Center at Orange Coast Medical Center in Fountain Valley, CA.

Family history Having a first-degree relative (sister, mother, daughter) or two or more first- or second-degree relatives (aunt, grandmother) diagnosed raises your risk, and more so if the relative developed breast cancer at

45 or younger.

A family history of ovarian cancer also increases the chances you might be carrying the BRCA gene, which ups your breast cancer risk.

improving your odds

► Lifestyle habits make a difference

Experts say to focus on these three.

Eat healthy "Obesity [a BMI over 25] is the single greatest

modifiable lifestyle risk for breast cancer," Reitherman says. More body fat ups estrogen levels, which can lead to cancer. A healthy diet includes plenty of fruits and veggies, whole grains and other sources of fiber like beans, and foods with "good" fat like avocados and nuts.

Exercise Aim for at least 30 minutes five days a week of vigorous exercise where you get



genetic link

If you have multiple family members who have had breast or ovarian cancer, talk to your doctor about genetic counseling and getting tested for BRCA gene mutations.



sweaty—brisk walking, jogging, biking, swimming. This helps you stay at a healthy weight and can lower circulating estrogen levels.

Limit alcohol

Alcohol impacts how your body metabolizes estrogen, and drinking too much can cause higher concentrations of the hormone, which can lead to breast cancer. Experts say one drink a day is the limit for women.

getting screenings

► **When should I start mammograms?**

Experts advise starting at 40. But if you have certain risk factors, your doctor may want to begin earlier. For example, if you have a first-degree relative who's been diagnosed with breast or ovarian cancer, the guideline is to have a mammogram when you're at least 10 years younger than the age the relative was when diagnosed if possible, says Lily Y. Zou, M.D., a board-certified

radiologist at Rolling Oaks Radiology in Thousand Oaks, CA. But no earlier than age 25 and no later than age 40.

► **Any other tests I should get?**

If you have dense breasts (ask at your first mammogram), talk to your doctor about a 3-D mammogram and an ultrasound, says Sara Fogarty, D.O.,



testing, testing

The American Breast Cancer Foundation's Breast Cancer Assistance Program offers screenings to the uninsured and underserved. For more information, check the website at abcf.org.

FACS, director, Sandra & Malcolm Berman Comprehensive Breast Care Center at Greater Baltimore Medical Center.

► **How often should I do self-exams?**

Experts advise doing them monthly—the week after your period or anytime if you're postmenopausal.

"Women get anxious about whether they're doing it right,"

Fogarty says. "The important part is to be aware of what your breasts look and feel like so if there are changes—lumps, redness, changes in texture of the breast skin, discharge from a nipple—you can call and say, 'This isn't normal for me,' so we can investigate."



is hormone treatment a risk factor?

Recent studies cite that taking hormone replacement therapy (HRT) to treat menopausal symptoms for more than five years may increase your odds for developing breast cancer. Talk to your doctor about the risks and benefits of HRT for you, Reitherman says. Consider questions like: How disruptive or uncomfortable are my symptoms? Are there other treatments I can try first? ■