Cancer Facts for Women

The cancers that most frequently affect women include breast, lung, colorectal, endometrial, ovarian, cervical, and skin cancer. Knowing about these cancers and how they can be prevented or detected early can save your life.

AMERICAN CANCER SOCIETY
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Breast Cancer

The Facts
More women in the United States are diagnosed with breast cancer every year than with any other cancer except skin cancer. This year, about 175,000 cases will be diagnosed and about 43,300 women will die of the disease. Many of these lives could have been saved by early diagnosis.

Who Is At Risk?
Most women who get breast cancer have no family history of the disease or other risk factors. Breast cancer can occur at any age, but it becomes more common as a woman gets older. Although some women are at slightly higher risk—women whose mothers or sisters had breast cancer, women who have never had children, and women who had their first child after age 30—the biggest risk factor for breast cancer is being a woman.

The Best Defense: Early Detection
The earlier breast cancer is detected, the easier it is to treat. The American Cancer Society recommends the following guidelines for early detection:

Age 40 and over:
• Have a mammogram every year
• Have a clinical breast exam by a health care professional every year*
• Do a breast self-exam each month

Age 20-39:
• Do a breast self-exam each month
• Have a clinical breast exam by a health care professional every three years

*Lung Cancer

The Facts
Lung cancer will claim the lives of about 68,000 women this year, more than any other cancer. Perhaps the greatest tragedy of lung cancer is that it can be almost totally prevented, but it still kills so many each year.

Who Is At Risk?
People who smoke are at the greatest risk of getting lung cancer and a host of other tobacco-related diseases such as heart disease, stroke, and emphysema. About 87% of all lung cancers are caused by smoking. Other risk factors include exposure to certain chemicals, such as arsenic, and exposure to radon, asbestos, and radiation, especially in smokers.

The Best Defense: Prevention
Lung cancer is one of the few cancers that can be prevented, because almost all of it is caused by smoking. If you are a smoker, ask your doctor to help you quit. If you don’t smoke, don’t start. If your friends and loved ones are smokers, help them to quit.

Colorectal Cancer

The Facts
Colorectal cancer is a disease of the lower digestive tract. About 67,000 women will be diagnosed with it this year, and about 28,800 will die of the disease. Advances in the detection and treatment of this cancer have made it very treatable if caught early.

Who Is At Risk?
Anyone is at risk for colorectal cancer. People with a family history of the disease or who have polyps in the colon or rectum or inflammatory bowel disease are at somewhat greater risk than the general population. Diets high in fat and low in fiber put people at higher risk for colorectal cancer.

The Best Defense: Early Detection
Most colorectal cancer begins as polyps which later become cancerous. These polyps can be detected and removed before they become cancer. In this sense, colorectal cancer is a disease that can be prevented. Eating food that is low in fat and high in fiber appears to lower the risk of colorectal cancer. The American Cancer Society recommends the following guidelines for early detection of colorectal cancer:

Age 50 and older, one of the following:
Fecal occult blood test every year and flexible sigmoidoscopy* every five years
or
Colonoscopy* every 10 years
or
Double-contrast barium enema* every five to 10 years

* A digital rectal exam should be done at the same time as sigmoidoscopy, colonoscopy, or double-contrast barium enema. People at moderate or high risk for colorectal cancer should talk with their doctor about a different screening schedule.

There have been remarkable advances in the treatment of this cancer, and most survivors of the disease do not need to have colostomies anymore. Don’t be afraid to talk about colorectal cancer with your doctor. An early diagnosis can save your life.
Cervical Cancer

The Facts
About 12,800 cases of cervical cancer will be diagnosed this year. Most of these will be caught early and cured, although about a third of these cases will still result in the patient's death. In certain groups of women, including women past the child-bearing years who do not regularly see a gynecologist, cervical cancer is more commonly found in advanced stages when cure is less likely.

Who Is At Risk?
Cervical cancer can affect any woman who is or has been sexually active. Risk of cervical cancer is higher in women who have had multiple sexual partners or in women whose partners have had multiple partners. Older women and women without access to regular medical care are especially vulnerable if they do not have regular Pap tests and gynecologic exams. Other women at high risk are those infected with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), women with genital warts, and women who smoke.

The Best Defense: Early Detection
Thanks to the Pap test, cervical cancer has become a relatively rare cancer in the United States. A Pap test can detect changes in the cervix that can be treated before they become cancer. The Pap test is also very effective in detecting cervical cancer in its early stages before it has spread to other parts of the body, when it is highly curable.

The American Cancer Society recommends that all women who have reached the age of 18 or who have been sexually active have a Pap test and pelvic exam every year. After three or more normal exams, the Pap test may be performed less frequently at her doctor's discretion.
Ovarian Cancer

The Facts
Approximately 25,200 cases of ovarian cancer occur annually, and it causes over 14,500 deaths a year, more than any other cancer of the female reproductive system. This is largely because it is a “silent” cancer with no obvious signs or symptoms until its late stages.

Who Is At Risk?
As with most cancers, the risk of getting ovarian cancer increases with age. Women who have never had children, women who have a family history of ovarian cancer, and women who have had breast cancer are at somewhat higher risk for this cancer. However, most women who get ovarian cancer do not have any of these risk factors. Pregnancy, the use of oral contraceptives, and having a tubal ligation decrease the risk of ovarian cancer; the risk decreases as the number of pregnancies and the years of use of oral contraceptives increases.

The Best Defense: Regular Checkups
Periodic, thorough pelvic exams are important. Unfortunately, there are no effective and proven tests for detecting the disease early, such as is the case with mammography and breast cancer. The Pap test, so effective in detecting cervical cancer in its early stages, only rarely detects ovarian cancer and usually in its late stages.

Endometrial Cancer

The Facts
Each year there are about 37,400 cases of cancer of the body of the uterus. These occur most often in the endometrium—the inside lining—of the uterus. About 6,400 women die of this cancer annually.

Who Is At Risk?
Endometrial cancer occurs most often in women over age 50. Estrogen replacement therapy and tamoxifen increase a woman’s risk of this disease. Other risk factors are the early onset of menstrual periods, late menopause, a history of infertility, never having had children, obesity, diabetes, and high blood pressure. Pregnancy and the use of oral contraceptives appear to provide some protection against this type of cancer.

The Best Defense: Early Detection
Watch for signs and symptoms, such as abnormal spotting or bleeding from the uterus. At menopause, women at high risk should have a tissue sample or biopsy taken from the endometrium for evaluation. Although the Pap test is very good at detecting cancer of the cervix (the part of the uterus that extends into the upper vagina), it is not a reliable test for early diagnosis of endometrial cancer.

Skin Cancer

The Facts
Although there are about 1 million cases of skin cancer diagnosed each year, most of these cancers are easily treated and cured. One type of skin cancer, melanoma, is deadly if not treated early and the number of new cases is increasing rapidly in both women and men.

Who Is At Risk?
People with fair complexions, especially redheads, have a greater risk of getting this type of cancer than people with darker coloring, although anyone who spends a lot of time in the sun is at risk. People who have had close family members with a melanoma are at higher risk for this type of skin cancer as are people who had severe sunburns before the age of 18. It is especially important to protect children from sun exposure.

The Best Defense: Prevention and Early Detection
Most skin cancers can be prevented by avoiding prolonged exposure to the midday sun. Wear protective clothing—hats with brims, long-sleeved shirts—and use sunscreen on all exposed parts of the skin. If you have children, protect them from the sun and don’t let them get sunburned. Examine your skin regularly, and have a skin exam during your regular health checkups.

Prevention or Early Detection—The Best Defense Against Cancer
Early detection—finding a cancer early before it has spread—gives you the best chance of being treated successfully. Too many women die each year from cancer. You can protect yourself and your family by reading the information in this pamphlet. You can reduce your risk for some cancers by adopting certain behaviors, for example, stopping smoking, losing weight, exercising more, using sunscreen. For additional information on cancer, please call our toll-free number listed below or visit our web site.

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For more information:
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