



World Cancer  
Research Fund  
Hong Kong

世界癌症研究基金會(香港)

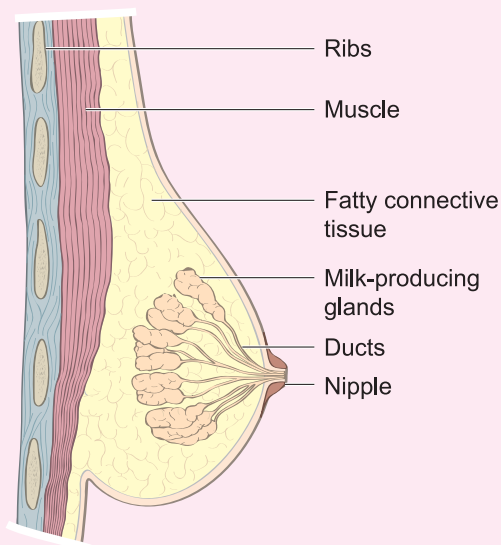


衛生署  
Department of Health

# REDUCING YOUR RISK OF BREAST CANCER



**Cancer is a broad term used to describe a group of more than 200 types of disease that affect different areas of the body. Research has shown that many types of cancer are linked to our diet and lifestyle, which means there are steps we can take to help prevent them. This leaflet is about reducing your risk of breast cancer.**



## **What is breast cancer?**

The breast consists mainly of fatty connective tissue, milk-producing glands and ducts that carry milk from the glands to the nipple. Breast tissue naturally develops in response to hormones at different stages of life – in particular, puberty, pregnancy and breastfeeding.

Breast cancers almost always develop in the glands or ducts that produce milk and carry it to the nipple. Cancers develop as a result of damaged cells, which can grow uncontrollably to form a lump or thickening called a tumour.

Many different factors contribute to the development of breast cancer, and hormones (particularly oestrogen) often play an important role. This means that life events that affect our hormone levels, such as having children, can also alter our cancer risk.

**There are also important factors that we can influence, such as our everyday diet and lifestyle choices. This leaflet will help you understand the choices you can make to reduce your risk.**

## Who is most at risk?

Due to better treatment and earlier detection, breast cancer survival rates are higher than ever before. It is, however, the most common cancer to affect women in Hong Kong and the number of cases is rising. Around 13 men in Hong Kong also develop breast cancer each year. **But there is strong and growing evidence that making positive changes to our way of life can reduce our risk of the disease.**

As with all cancers, the risk of developing breast cancer depends on a number of factors and varies from person to person. For example, not having children, or having a late first pregnancy (over age 30), increases breast cancer risk – both these events affect hormone levels in the body.

Only around four to nine per cent of breast cancer cases are hereditary, and many of the factors that increase our chances of developing the disease are linked to our lifestyle.

### Lifestyle risk factors

- Being overweight or obese
- Lack of physical activity
- Drinking alcohol
- Not breastfeeding when you have a baby

**The good news is that there are simple changes we can make that can help to reduce our risk.**

### Other risk factors include

- Age – your risk increases as you get older
- Starting your periods at a younger age (before age 12)
- Late menopause (over age 55)
- Family history – particularly a close relative diagnosed before age 50
- Taking hormone replacement therapy (HRT) – risk continues to increase slightly the longer you take HRT, but decreases gradually once you stop
- The contraceptive pill – breast cancer risk increases slightly when taking the pill, but slowly returns to normal after you stop

If any of these apply to you, it does not mean that you will develop breast cancer – it just means that your risk may be higher than average.

The important thing to remember is that you can make healthy diet and physical activity choices at any age to help reduce your risk.



## Reducing your risk

In 2007, the World Cancer Research Fund (WCRF) global network published an Expert Report on preventing cancer: Food, Nutrition, Physical Activity, and the Prevention of Cancer: a Global Perspective. This reviewed the findings of over 7,000 scientific studies on food, nutrition, physical activity and body weight in relation to cancer prevention.

The Report found that there are steps we can take to reduce our risk of breast cancer. These are the key things we can do:



### Maintain a healthy weight

Strong research shows that being overweight or obese increases the risk of postmenopausal breast cancer – the most common type. Try to maintain a healthy weight and limit the amount of weight you gain throughout life (particularly around your waist) through a balanced diet and regular physical activity.



### Be physically active

As well as helping you avoid weight gain, physical activity plays an important role in balancing your hormone levels, so it can directly reduce breast cancer risk. Aim for at least 30 minutes of moderate activity every day.



### Limit alcoholic drinks

There is strong evidence that alcoholic drinks are a risk factor for breast cancer. It is a good idea to limit alcoholic drinks to 2 for men and 1 for women a day, if consumed at all.



### Choose a healthy diet

- Choosing healthy foods and drinks instead of those that are energy dense (high in fat and/or sugar) can help you avoid being overweight or obese.
- Try to include more wholegrains (like brown rice and wholegrain bread), pulses (like beans and lentils), and fruits and vegetables in your diet as they are less energy dense and are good choices for weight maintenance.



### Breastfeeding

If you are able to, breastfeeding is a healthy choice for you and your baby. Strong evidence shows that breastfeeding protects mothers against breast cancer and babies from excess weight gain. It is best for mothers to breastfeed exclusively for up to 6 months and then add other liquids and foods.



## Being Breast Aware

Breast awareness means being familiar with the normal look and feel of your breasts so that you are able to spot any irregular changes early on.

You don't have to follow a special routine. Just be aware of what is normal by looking at and feeling your breasts regularly – for example, when in the shower or when getting dressed. Some women find it easier to check their breasts when they are lying down.



## What changes should I look out for?

It's important to be aware of any changes, such as:

- A change in the size or shape of your breast
- A change in skin texture, such as puckering or dimpling, or a rash around your nipple
- Discharge from one or both nipples, or if your nipple becomes pulled in (inverted) or changes position or shape
- New and persistent discomfort or pain in one part of your breast or armpit
- A new lump or thickening in your breast or armpit – bear in mind that breasts can be quite lumpy normally, especially just before a period

If you notice any of these changes, it is best to visit your doctor as soon as possible. In many cases, they are caused by something less serious, but it's important to have a check-up.

## What about screening?

The good news is that most breast cancer cases can be successfully treated if they are detected early - that's why it is important to remain breast aware and to seek professional medical advice as soon as any irregular changes are spotted. This will help make early diagnosis and treatment possible. For individuals with a strong personal and family history of breast cancer and those on hormonal replacement therapy (HRT), it is best to contact your physician to determine if regular surveillance for breast cancer through mammography or clinical breast examination is appropriate.



## Related Information

**The Family Health Service of the Department of Health** offers a health promotion and disease prevention programme for women aged at or below 64. The programme includes health education and counseling, physical examination and appropriate screening tests (e.g. screening mammography).



For more information, please visit the website [www.fhs.gov.hk](http://www.fhs.gov.hk);  
or call the 24-hour information hotline 2112 9900.

**World Cancer Research Fund Hong Kong (WCRF HK)** is a charity which promotes research and related education on cancer prevention. WCRF HK provides practical advices on cancer prevention including **healthy diet**, **physical activity** and **weight management**.



To learn more, please visit [www.wcrf-hk.org](http://www.wcrf-hk.org) or call WCRF HK on 2529 5025.

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