

By James Martin, Jr, MD

The American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists

Breast cancer is the second most common cause of cancer deaths among women in the U.S. It's not surprising that a diagnosis of this disease is a fear many women share. However, being informed about the risk factors, detection, and treatment of breast cancer can help empower women to move beyond fear and into action.

The two main risk factors for breast cancer are being a woman and getting older. Family history, personal history of certain cancers, no pregnancies or first pregnancy later in life, starting periods before age 12 or menopause at age 55 or after, obesity, alcohol intake, and use of some types of hormone therapy can also increase a woman's risk.

While some risk factors including age and family history are beyond your control, others such as weight and the amount of alcohol you drink, can be improved. You can learn more about your risk of breast and other cancers at understandingrisk.cancer.gov.

Women with breast cancer have up to a 98 percent survival rate when it is caught at an early stage. Earlier detection and advances in treatment have led to the gradual decrease in breast cancer deaths. Mammography screening remains the best available method to detect breast cancer early. Regular mammograms are crucial to identifying tumors when they are most treatable, but unfortunately, many women skip being screened.

ACOG recommends that all women ages 40 and older should have a mammogram annually. If you have certain risk factors, such as being a carrier of the BRCA1 or BRCA2 gene, your doctor may suggest mammography screening at a younger age. High-risk women should discuss their prevention options with their doctors. For information on where you can find free or low-cost mammography screenings, go to cdc.gov/cancer/nbccedp.

Women ages 40 and older should also have their breasts examined by their doctor annually. Women ages 20–39 should have this done every one to three years. Additionally, all women ages 20 and older should become familiar with the normal appearance and feel of their breasts and tell their doctor if they notice any changes.

There are currently a number of effective treatment options available for breast cancer. Ultimately, a woman and her doctor will choose the treatment that is right for her, based on the location and extent of the cancer, her age and preferences, and the risks and benefits of each treatment.

As a national sponsor of National Breast Cancer Awareness Month in October, ACOG encourages women to focus on breast health now. For more information and resources on breast cancer, treatment options, and where you can find support, go to nbcam.org.