

Be
Breast
Aware



Contents

Reducing the Risk of Breast Cancer	1
Risks of Developing Breast Cancer	1
Known Risk Factors	2
Possible Risk Factors	2
Breast Self-Examination	3
Minimizing Your Risk	5
Recommendations for Early Detection of Breast Cancer	6
Summary of Evidence	7
Important Information	7


Breast
Aware

Reducing the Risk of Breast Cancer

Breast cancer is the most common forms of cancer in women. While the causes of breast cancer are not fully understood. You can lower your risk of developing the disease by minimizing lifestyle and environmental risk factors. Early detection and breast screening improve survival from the disease.

Risks of Developing Breast Cancer

Scientific researchers are not certain of the direct causes of breast cancer, but have identified some proven risk factors as well as others that are suspected or possible even those who are at 'high risk' may never get the disease. Having breast implants to change your breast size or shape, or to rebuild a breast after surgery, is not a risk factor in breast cancer.

References

¹ Source: the Malta National Cancer Registry (MNCR)

² Source: EUROCARE-2 study: Survival of Cancer Patients in Europe, IARC, Lyon, 1999

³ Source: The European Code Against Cancer: A tool for general practitioners. Edition for the UK

1

Known Risk Factors

- Gender: More than 99% of breast cancers occur in women
- Age: risk increases as you get older
- Early menstruation (before the age of 12)
- Late menopause (after age 55)
- Having a first baby after age 30 or never having a baby
- Having a close relative with breast cancer at a younger age
- Being physically inactive
- Being overweight



2

Possible Risk Factors

- Eating too few fruits and vegetables
- Drinking too much alcohol
- Never breastfeeding
- Smoking tobacco
- Using birth control pills
- Taking hormone replacement therapy for a long period of time

Breast Self-examination

Breast Self-Examination (BSE) is an easy and painless way to screen for breast cancer. Beginning at age 20, every woman should perform BSE regularly. This is easy to perform and this examination may bring a woman for a more detailed clinical or mammographic check sooner when the cancer is most treatable.

1. Every woman's breasts are different, so you must learn what is normal for you. Any small change in the way your breast looks or feels could be an important early sign. You should begin BSE in front of a mirror undressed to the waist with your arms relaxed at your sides. Be careful to look for any skin color changes, dimpling, or puckering of the skin or change in breast size or shape. Also look at the nipple for changes such as scaliness or pulling to one side or a change in the direction in which it points.



2. The next step is to place your hands on your waist and press inward. By tightening these muscles, changes may be easier to see. Look for any changes as in **Step 1**.

3. The third step involves placing your hands up above your head and pressing forward. Once again, look for changes as in **Steps 1 and 2**.



4. Take your hand and find your collar bone and rub your hand firmly down the breast, feeling for lumps, thickenings, or changes from previous exams. Move your fingers in smaller circles until you have felt the entire breast.

5. Next, use one hand to support the breast and with the other hand press firmly, feeling for lumps, thickenings or changes.

6. Any nipple discharge could be a sign of a breast problem. To check for nipple discharge, firmly squeeze the breast tissue around the nipple using your thumb and middle finger.

7. Use your hand to check for any changes or lumps in the armpit.



8. You should lie down in bed to complete the breast exam.

Take a pillow and place it under your right shoulder and put your right hand behind your head. This spreads the breast tissue out, making it easier to examine and find changes. Use your left hand to examine your right breast. Many women find it easier to feel changes by putting lotion on their fingers. Hold the fingers of your left hand together, keeping them flat, and use firm pressure to move in circles around your breast.

Nine out of every 10 breast lumps are found by women themselves. Although nine out of every ten lumps are NOT cancerous, it is important to seek medical help immediately when a change or lump is detected and persists over 3-4 weeks. Early detection is the best defence against breast cancer.

Minimizing Your Risk

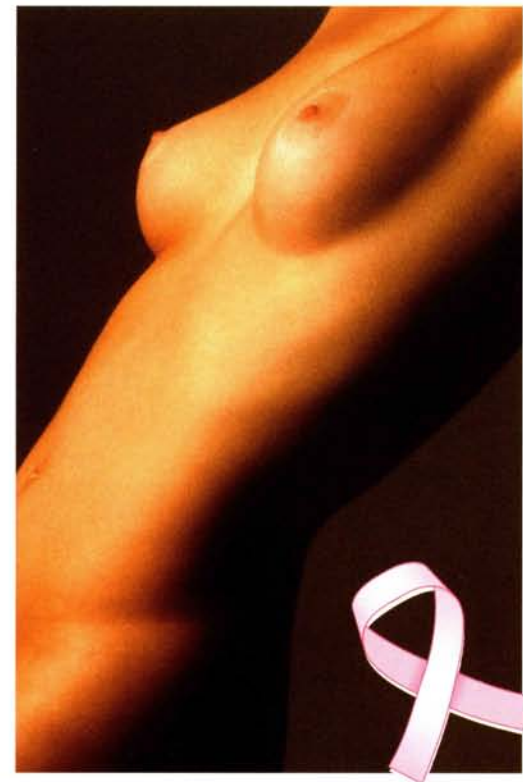
As you can see from the above lists, there are risk factors for breast cancer that you have no control over, such as your age, your family history or your reproductive history. But you can substantially reduce your risk by making positive changes to your lifestyle.

- Be physically active. Studies show that even moderate physical activity can reduce your risk by 30 to 40 per cent. Choose an exercise or an activity that makes you feel warm and breathe harder (such as brisk walking) for 30 to 60 minutes, at least four times a week.
- Lose excess weight. A 5-kg increase in body weight can be a significant breast cancer risk factor, especially after menopause.
- Eat more fruits and vegetables. A lower-fat diet that includes five to ten servings of fruits and vegetables every day will minimize your risk for several types of cancer, including breast cancer.
- Limit your intake of alcohol. Women who drink alcohol have a slightly higher risk. The more you drink, the greater your risk. Limit yourself to one drink per day.
- Breastfeed your baby. Breastfeeding seems to offer some women protection against breast cancer and it's good for the baby. Breastfeed for at least four months.
- Quit smoking. Smoking tobacco and breathing second-hand smoke have been linked to breast cancer.
- Weigh the risks and benefits of taking birth control pills. Taking birth control pills may slightly increase your risk of breast cancer if you are a long term pill user and began taking birth control pills at a young age. Since birth control pills also offer benefits, discuss this with your doctor.
- Talk to your doctor about the risks and benefits of hormone replacement therapy (HRT). HRT can relieve symptoms of menopause. Using HRT for a long time may increase your risk of breast cancer.
- If you are a woman between 50 and 69 years of age, you should have a screening mammogram (a breast cancer screening x-ray) every two years.

Recommendations for Early Detection of Breast Cancer

- Women over 20 should carry out breast self-examination every month and are to continue doing so throughout their lives.
- Women over 30 should ask their doctor or gynecologist to examine their breast once a year.
- All women are advised to consult their doctor if and when they have any doubts or suspicions.

Mammography is a screening tool for the early detection of breast cancer and is done in women who have no symptoms.



Summary of evidence

- Cancer of the female breast is the most commonly diagnosed cancer in Maltese women. On average 219 new cases of breast cancer and 68 deaths attributed to this cancer are registered per year¹.
- Survival rates are improving because of earlier detection and more effective therapies.
- Survival rates vary markedly according to whether the cancer is localised or has spread at the point of diagnosis. The rate of survival is over 90% when the cancer is localised within the breast, 75% when it has spread to adjoining areas, but below 20% when the cancer has reached other distant sites².
- Self-examination is associated with diagnosis of tumours at an earlier stage and a small survival advantage cannot be excluded. Early stage diagnosis also reduces the need for radical surgery. The breast awareness campaign is designed to promote early presentation of minimal breast signs and symptoms, including lumps, without increasing anxiety or unnecessary investigation³.

7

Important Information

Breast Care Clinic	2545 4573
Breast Care Support Group Europa Donna	21 482602
Helpline	9999 4666
Email	breastcaresupportgroup@gmail.com
Website	www.europadonnamalta.org.mt

Supported by



**Vodafone
Malta
Foundation**



Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Department

5B, The Emporium, C. De Brocktorff Str., Msida
MSD 1421 Malta. Tel: 2326 6000,
www.sahha.gov.mt



Government of Malta

Parliamentary Secretariat for Health
Ministry for Social Policy