

Breast Cancer

What you should know

What is breast cancer?

Breast cancer is when the normal cells in your breast grow in an abnormal way to form a lump called a tumour.

Some facts about breast cancer

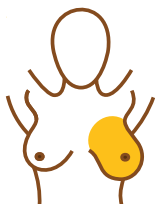
- ▶ Breast cancer is the most common cancer in women in Ireland, after skin cancer.
- ▶ Men can also get breast cancer, but it is very rare.
- ▶ Around 3,500 women and 35 men are diagnosed with it each year.
- ▶ 1 in 7 women in Ireland will get breast cancer at some point in their lives.
- ▶ Better treatments mean that more breast cancers are being cured or kept under control for longer.

We use the terms 'men' and 'women' to talk about how many people get breast cancer (incidence), as this is how statistics are recorded.

What are the symptoms of breast cancer?



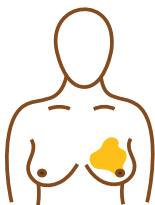
- ▶ A lump or thickening in your breast or armpit.



- ▶ A change in the size or shape of one breast.



- ▶ A change in the skin of your breast, like puckering or dimpling (the skin may look like orange peel).



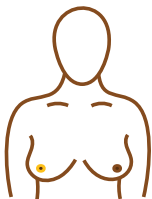
- ▶ A breast abscess (infected boil) – this may appear as a red, tender area on your breast.



- ▶ A change in your nipple, like a pulled-in, sunken or flattened nipple.



- ▶ An unusual discharge (liquid) from one or both of your nipples – the discharge may be blood stained or watery.



- ▶ A change on or around the nipple, like a rash or flaky or crusted skin.



- ▶ Swelling in your armpit or around your collarbone.

Breast pain alone is not usually a sign of breast cancer.

These symptoms can be caused by other things, but always get them checked by your GP (family doctor).

How can I check myself?

Get to know what's normal for you and how your breasts **look** and **feel**.

Check your breasts once a month. The week after your period is a good time, as your breasts will generally be less lumpy and tender. If you do not get periods, check your breasts the first day of each month.

It's important to check your breasts regularly. You have a better chance of cure and recovery if breast cancer is diagnosed early, before it has grown bigger or spread to other parts of the body.

Look

Stand in front of a mirror. With your arms by your side, inspect your breasts:



1. Look for skin changes, like dimpling or puckering.



2. Look for changes to the shape or size of your breast and/or nipple.

3. Now do the same with your hands on your hips, tilting slightly forward.

Your left and right breast are rarely identical, so learn what is normal for you.

Feel

This may be easiest to do in the shower using a warm soapy hand. If you have larger breasts, it may be easier to do lying down.

Using the flat part of your middle three fingers, feel for any lumps or changes:



- 1. Start from the nipple and move clockwise until you have covered the whole breast, armpit and collarbone.**
- 2. Repeat on the other side.**

9 out of 10 breast changes are not cancer.

But if you spot a change, talk to your GP without delay.

What should I do if I have symptoms?

Breast cancer can happen at any age and at any time. Always get any symptoms checked by your GP – even if you recently had a screening test or are due one soon or you are outside the age range for screening. The chances are it will not be cancer. Getting your symptoms checked is not wasting anyone's time.

Can I be screened for breast cancer?

Testing for cancer when you have no symptoms is called screening. BreastCheck is the national breast cancer screening programme. All women and people with breasts aged 50 to 69 are invited to have a free mammogram (breast X-ray) every 2 years.

For more information, see www.breastcheck.ie

How is breast cancer diagnosed?

If your doctor thinks your symptoms need to be checked further, you will have more tests.

These tests may include:

- ▶ **Mammogram:** an X-ray of your breasts.
- ▶ **Ultrasound scan:** a scan to see if there are lumps in your breast.
- ▶ **Biopsy:** a specialist takes tissue samples from your breast and examines them under a microscope.

If you are diagnosed with breast cancer, you can find more information in our Understanding breast cancer booklet.



What increases my risk of breast cancer?

Risk factors increase your chance of getting breast cancer. Some of those things we can change and some things we can't change. Having a risk factor doesn't mean you will get breast cancer. Sometimes people with no risk factors get the disease.

Things we can change



Alcohol

Drinking alcohol increases your risk of breast cancer. Alcohol causes around 1 in 13 breast cancers diagnosed in Ireland each year. The less you drink the lower your risk.



Weight

Staying a healthy weight decreases your risk of breast cancer. If you are overweight, even losing some weight over time can lower your breast cancer risk.



Physical activity

Being physically active reduces your risk of breast cancer. Try to do at least 150 minutes of moderate or 75 minutes of vigorous physical activity a week. Moderate activity makes you a little warm and out of breath, increases your heart rate, and you can talk but not sing. Vigorous activity raises your heart rate, makes you sweat and feel out of breath, and barely able to talk.



Breastfeeding

Breastfeeding decreases your risk of breast cancer. The longer you breastfeed over the course of your life, the more you reduce your breast cancer risk.



Hormone replacement therapy (HRT)

Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) is a drug used to help manage the symptoms of menopause. Some types of HRT may increase the risk of breast cancer, but the increased risk is small and the benefits may outweigh the risks. Talk to your GP about your options.



Oral contraceptive pill

The oral contraceptive pill can increase your risk of breast cancer. Each person's risk will be different. Talk to your GP about what is right for you.



Eating habits

A balanced, healthy diet can help you to maintain a healthy body weight, which decreases the risk of cancer.



Smoking

You have a greater risk of breast cancer if you smoke or use tobacco products. Quitting reduces your breast cancer risk.

Things we can't change

▶ Age

Your risk of breast cancer increases as you grow older. Breast cancer is most common in women over 50 years of age, but it can happen in younger women.

▶ Family history and genes

Your risk of breast cancer is increased if a close member of your family (your mother, sister or daughter) had it, especially if they were younger than 50, or if more than one close relative was affected. If you have a strong family history of breast cancer (including male breast cancer) or related cancers like ovarian cancer, there might be a faulty gene in your family that increases your risk of breast cancer. For example, a faulty BRCA1 or BRCA2 gene. Faulty genes only cause about 5–10 in every 100 breast cancers.

▶ Dense breast tissue

If your breasts have more non-fatty (dense) tissue, your risk of breast cancer is a bit higher than if you have less dense breasts. You can't tell your breast density by feeling or looking at your breasts. Researchers are working to try and answer these questions, learning more about the link between breast density and breast cancer.

▶ **Age when periods started and stopped**

Your risk is higher if you started your periods before age 12 or went through menopause after age 55.

▶ **Children**

Not having given birth or giving birth for the first time after age 30 slightly increases your risk.

▶ **Previous breast disease**

Being diagnosed with breast cancer or atypical ductal hyperplasia (ADH) increases your risk of developing breast cancer in the future.

▶ **Radiotherapy**

Having had radiotherapy to your chest area in the past increases your risk.

Contact us for more information or support

If you are worried or have questions about breast cancer or any cancer:



Call our Support Line on Freephone 1800 200 700.



Email supportline@irishcancer.ie

We will provide you with confidential advice, support and information.



Ask about a call in your language.

Visit our **Daffodil Centres**, where our nurses can give you advice about how to spot cancer early and how to help prevent it. To find out where your local Daffodil Centre is, email daffodilcentreinfo@irishcancer.ie

Visit our website www.cancer.ie for more information on breast cancer and ways you can reduce your risk of cancer.

