

## Lifestyle versus Breast Cancer

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Each year, we learn more about how a woman's lifestyle and health habits, such as the kind of food she eats, how much she weighs, and the amount she exercises, can affect her risk of developing breast cancer. I am often asked how a woman can reduce her risk of developing breast cancer.

We know that being overweight can increase the risk of breast cancer after menopause. And we know that the risk increases with weight gain. Women who gain more than 70 pounds as adults double their risk of developing breast cancer. Physical activity has been associated with a 10 percent-25 percent reduction in risk. Maintaining a healthy weight, being physically active, and reducing alcohol intake are the best ways for women to reduce their risk of breast cancer.

When it comes to diet, there are no specific foods a woman should eat to reduce breast cancer risk. For women who are concerned about their risk of breast cancer, the best eating plan and calorie level is one that helps them achieve and maintain a healthy weight. Breast cancer risk begins to increase when adult weight gain, defined as weight gain since age 18, is more than 20 pounds. A recent American Cancer Society Study found that women who gained 21-30 pounds since age 18 were 40 percent more likely to develop breast cancer than women who had not gained more than 5 pounds, and women who gained 70 pounds doubled their risk. Further, excess weight greatly increases the risk for metastatic tumors, which are more difficult to treat than tumors that have not spread. Women who gained more than 60 pounds since age 18 were 3 times more likely to have metastatic breast cancer than women who gained less than 20 pounds as an adult. If you have gained weight, losing it can help. Recent studies do show that losing weight can help lower the risk of post-menopausal breast cancer. The key message for women is it's really never too late to start living healthier.

Another question I often hear relates to the consumption of alcohol. Mainly, is it safe to have a drink or a glass of wine? Regular consumption of more than one alcoholic drink per day is associated with an increased risk of breast cancer, particularly in women who do not consume enough of the vitamin folate. Therefore, for women who do drink, reducing alcohol may be an important way to reduce breast cancer risk. I would encourage all women, but especially those who drink, to consume folate-rich foods such as leafy greens, legumes, and enriched whole-grain products.

Another important factor in our health, both general health and cancer risk, is our level of physical activity. Physical activity affects breast cancer in two distinct ways. First, there is a direct affect on circulating hormones, and second, there is an indirect affect by helping to control weight. The American Cancer Society recommends that women be moderately to vigorously active for 45-60 minutes on five or more days per week to lower breast cancer risk. Activities considered moderate are those that make you breathe as hard as you would during a brisk walk. This includes things like walking, biking, and even housework and gardening. Vigorous activities generally engage large muscle groups and cause a noticeable increase in heart rate, breathing depth and frequency, and sweating. Each woman can determine how to fit 45-60 minutes of activity into her day, five days a week, by finding the things that she really enjoys doing and will keep doing. A few pointers that may help women design their own plan are to strive to make it a priority. Schedule physical activity into your day/week just like other appointments you have. Try to exercise with others. Many women find it easier to stay motivated and committed if they are exercising with other people. If you are that type, find someone who shares your desire to get more activity. And finally, if lack of childcare is an issue, maybe you could find someone in your neighborhood who could "switch off" with you, you watch her kids while she works out, and she watches yours when you work out. In the long run, it is important that you find that time, and exercise on a regular basis.