

Young Women's Breast Cancer Risk

Early Onset Breast Cancer

Breast cancer is the second most common cancer among women in the United States. All women are at risk for getting breast cancer, but some factors can raise a woman's risk for getting breast cancer before age 45. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), about 10% of all breast cancer cases in the United States are found in women younger than 45 years of age.

Breast cancer in young women is:

- More likely to be hereditary than breast cancer in older women
- More common among African American women
- More likely to be found at a later stage and is often more aggressive and harder to treat
- Often leads to concerns about body image, sexual health, fertility, feelings of isolation, mental health, and the financial burden of treatment and care.

Time is of the essence for young women at risk for early onset breast cancer. All young women need to learn their family health history, understand their risk, and know the signs and symptoms of breast cancer.

Who is At Risk for Breast Cancer at a Young Age?

While all women are at risk for getting breast cancer, some women have a higher risk of getting breast cancer at a young age.

- Those with a family history of some types of cancer have a higher risk of breast cancer at a young age. The family health history on both sides of the family can affect a person's risk for breast cancer – your biological mother's side and your biological father's side of the family.
- Black women are more likely to be diagnosed with breast cancer under the age of 35 than white women of the same age
- Ashkenazi Jewish women have a higher risk of breast cancer at a young age due to increased likelihood of inheriting a BRCA1 or BRCA2 genetic mutation

How Can Young Women Manage Their Risk?

The most important steps young women can take toward managing their risk for breast cancer is learning about their family history and sharing what they learn with a doctor. If young women have a family history of cancer, they should ask their doctor if genetic counseling and testing is right for them. If they are found to have a risk of hereditary breast and ovarian cancer, there are steps they can take to lower their risk.

Signs/Symptoms and the Importance of Self-Advocacy

In addition to understanding and learning how to lower their risk for breast cancer, young women should also be aware of signs and symptoms of breast cancer. Not all young women diagnosed with breast cancer have a known family history, so it is important that women of all ages know how their breasts normally look and feel and talk to a healthcare provider immediately if they notice any changes to their breasts.

How Can Television Help?

If you are writing a breast cancer storyline, consider showing:

- A character learning their family history of cancer and sharing what they learn with a doctor
- Dialogue between characters that allows young women watching to understand that if they learn their family history of cancer, they can take steps to reduce their risk
- A character who is under the age of 45 years old receiving a breast cancer diagnosis or learning she is at risk of breast cancer at a young age.

In addition to narrative considerations, other opportunities to educate viewers include:

- Adding an end card that links to resources
- Including a PSA from an actor in the show at the end of an episode
- Sharing additional resources and information on your show's social media platforms