



AMERICAN COLLEGE OF  
OBSTETRICIANS AND  
GYNECOLOGISTS

## Reducing Your Risk of Cancer

Each year, thousands of women die from cancer. Many lives can be saved if cancer is found and treated early. A healthy lifestyle can go a long way toward reducing the risk of cancer. Taking notice of changes in your body and having certain screening tests can help find cancer early — when it is easiest to treat.

### What Is Cancer?

Healthy cells that make up the body's tissues grow, divide and replace themselves on a regular basis. Sometimes certain cells develop abnormally and begin to grow out of control. This causes growths or tumors to form. Tumors can be benign (not cancer) or malignant (cancer).

Malignant tumors can invade and destroy nearby healthy tissues and organs. Cancer cells also can spread (or metastasize) to other parts of the body and form new tumors.

### Tips to Reduce Your Risk of Cancer

Many cancers are linked to your lifestyle. By being aware of things that can cause cancer, you can make changes that may help prevent it:

- Don't smoke.
- Limit your intake of fat (no more than 20 percent to 30 percent of total calories).
- Eat high-fiber foods (at least five servings of fruits and vegetables per day).
- Get regular health checkups.
- Exercise every day for at least 30 minutes.
- Limit your time in the sun and use sun block when you go outside.
- Pay attention to changes in your body.
- Limit your number of sexual partners.
- Have screening tests on time.
- Limit your intake of alcohol.

### Types of Cancer

There are many types of cancer. Different cancers have different risk factors, warning signs and treatments.

#### **Lung Cancer**

Lung cancer is the leading cause of death from cancer in both women and men. Most lung cancer is caused by cigarette smoking. Women who smoke are 12 times more likely to get lung cancer than women who have never smoked.

Lung cancer is hard to detect. Once symptoms occur, cancer may be advanced. Chest X-rays, computed tomography, and exams of the bronchial passages (airways) can help your doctor diagnose lung cancer.

#### **Colon and Rectal Cancer**

Fewer people are dying from cancer of the colon and rectum. This may be because more of the cases are found early. In addition to a rectal exam, screening tests can help detect cancer of the colon and rectum. They include:

- Fecal occult blood test
- Sigmoidoscopy
- Colonoscopy
- Double contrast barium enema

Colon and rectal cancer also may be linked to diet. Eating foods that are low in fat and high in fiber (such as fruits, vegetables and whole-grain cereals) may help reduce the risk of getting the disease.

### ***Skin Cancer***

Skin cancer is the most common form of cancer in the United States. Almost half of Americans who live to be age 65 will develop some form of it. Skin cancer also is the easiest cancer to prevent.

There are three main types of skin cancer:

1. Basal cell
2. Squamous cell
3. Melanoma

In most cases, basal cell and squamous cell cancers are cured after they are removed. Basal cell and squamous cell cancers show up as pale, waxlike, pearly bumps or red, scaly patches.

Melanoma starts with small, molelike growths. The growths get bigger, change color and get darker. They grow in an irregular — not round — shape and may bleed easily. Melanoma is the leading cause of death from skin cancer.

### ***Breast Cancer***

The risk of breast cancer is one in eight for women who live to be age 85 or older. Breast cancer is the second leading cause of death from cancer among women. As you get older, your risk increases.

If detected early, breast cancer can be treated with good results.

To help detect breast cancer, women should examine their breasts at home every month. Self-exams help you learn the normal feel and shape of your breasts.

Along with monthly self-exams, you should have a breast exam by your health care provider once a year. Mammography is a test that can help detect cancer in the breast before it can be felt. Women aged 40 to 49 years should have a mammogram every one to two years. Starting at age 50, women should have one every year.

### ***Cervical Cancer***

Cancer of the cervix was once one of the most common causes of death from cancer for women in the United States. Today, the rate has decreased in large part because of the Pap test, which can help find problems early, before they become cancer.

### ***Cancer of the Endometrium***

Cancer of the endometrium (the lining of the uterus) occurs most often in women between 60 and 75 years of age. It is rare in women younger than 40 years.

Cancer of the endometrium is more common in women who take estrogen therapy without a progestin hormone after menopause. Women who take birth control pills appear to have a lower risk.

### ***Cancer of the Ovary***

The warning signs of cancer of the ovary include:

- Discomfort in the pelvic region
- Indigestion, gas, or bloating that can't be explained
- Abnormal vaginal bleeding
- Pain and swelling of the abdomen

There is no sure way to screen for cancer of the ovary. Ultrasound testing and a blood test for the antigen CA 125 are being studied as methods that may be helpful for some women.

**Cancer of the Vulva and Vagina**

Cancers of the vulva and vagina are rare. In most cases, they appear as a sore or lump on the vulva or in the vagina itself. These cancers occur most often in women older than 60 years. They may occur at any age, though.

**Finally ...**

A healthy lifestyle, screening tests and regular check-ups all can help lower your risk of cancer. Many types of cancer can be cured if they are treated before the disease spreads. Being aware of the types of cancer and how to detect them early can lead to success in treatment. If you or any of your family members have had cancer, this may increase your risk. Be sure to know your family health history.

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