Women’s Health: Breast Cancer

Every three minutes, a woman is diagnosed with breast cancer, the second-leading cause of cancer death in American women. The American Cancer Society also estimates that 2,000 men are diagnosed with the disease every year.

Breast cancer is a disease in which malignant cells form in the tissues of the breast. There are three main types:

- **Ductal carcinoma** – The most common; begins in the cells of the ducts.
- **Lobular carcinoma** – Begins in the lobes and is more often found in both breasts than are other types of breast cancer.
- **Inflammatory breast cancer** – Uncommon type in which the breast is warm, red and swollen.

**Causes and Risk Factors**
It is unclear as to what specifically triggers breast cells to grow abnormally. Medical experts attribute the development of breast cancer to a combination of both unknown and known factors including genetics, lifestyle choices and reproductive factors, which may include:

- Older age
- The onset of menstruation at an early age
- Family history
- Having dense breast tissue
- Never having given birth, or having first given birth at an older age
- Having radiation therapy to the breast/chest
- Drinking alcoholic beverages

**Symptoms and Screenings**
The most common indication of breast cancer is discovering a lump in the breast or underarm area. Other signs include:

- Swelling
- Skin irritation/dimpling
- Nipple pain/abnormalities
- Redness or scaly skin
- Discharge from the nipple

It is important to get any areas of concern checked out by a doctor. To detect breast cancer, the following tests and procedures may be used by physicians:

- **Mammogram** – a breast X-ray
- **Biopsy** – the removal of cells or tissues so they can be viewed under a microscope
- **Estrogen and progesterone receptor tests** – to determine the levels of each hormone
- **MRI (magnetic resonance imaging)** – a procedure that uses a magnet, radio waves and a computer to make a series of detailed pictures of inside the body

**Prognosis and Treatment**
The chance of recovery and the treatment options depend on many factors, including the stage of cancer, how fast the tumor is growing, hormone receptor levels, and a woman’s age and general health. There are four standard types of treatment used for breast cancer:

- **Surgery**, ranging from a small lump of tissue being removed to an entire breast (mastectomy).
- **Radiation therapy** uses high-energy X-rays to kill cancer cells or to prevent their growth.
- **Chemotherapy** uses drugs to stop the growth of cancer cells.
- **Hormone therapy** removes hormones or blocks their action to keep cancer cells from growing.

**Prevention**
It is important to give yourself monthly breast exams (see box). Other ways to keep breast cancer at bay:

- Limit alcohol and fats.
- Stay physically active.
- Maintain a healthy weight.

Visit [www.breastcancer.org](http://www.breastcancer.org) or [www.komen.org](http://www.komen.org) for more information.

**Did you know...?**
The best way to find breast cancer early is by performing a breast self-exam each month. Start by looking at your breasts in the mirror to see if they look physically different. Next, lie down and use a few fingers in a circular motion to go over each breast. Finally, do the same motion while standing. View the video on [www.komen.org](http://www.komen.org) or the diagram on [www.breastcancer.org](http://www.breastcancer.org) for more assistance.