Breast cancer. Just reading those words can make many women worry. And that’s natural. Nearly everyone knows someone touched by the disease.

But there is a lot of good news about breast cancer these days. Treatments keep getting better, and we know more than ever about ways to prevent the disease. These eight steps can help lower the risk of breast cancer. Not every one applies to every woman, but most women will have some steps they can take to improve their breast health. And making even a single change can have benefit.

1. Keep Weight in Check

It’s easy to tune out because it gets said so often, but maintaining a healthy weight is an important goal for everyone. Being overweight can increase the risk of many different cancers, including breast cancer, especially after menopause.

2. Be Physically Active

Regular exercise is one of the best things for your health. It can boost mood and energy. It can help keep weight in check. And it can lower the risk of many serious diseases, including breast cancer. Try to get at least 30 minutes a day, but any amount of physical activity is better than none.

3. Eat Your Fruits & Vegetables – and Avoid Alcohol

A healthy diet can help lower the risk of breast cancer. Try to eat a lot of fruits and vegetables and limit alcohol. While moderate drinking can be good for the heart in older adults, even low levels of drinking can increase the risk of breast cancer. And with other risks of alcohol, not drinking is the overall healthiest choice.

4. Don’t Smoke

On top of its many other health risks, smoking causes at least 15 different cancers – including breast cancer. If you smoke, try to quit as soon as possible. It’s almost never too late to get benefits. You can do it. And getting help can double your chances of quitting for good: visit smokefree.gov or call 800-QUIT-NOW (in IL 866-QUIT-YES).

5. Breastfeed, If Possible

Breastfeeding for a total of one year or more (combined for all children) lowers the risk of breast cancer. It also has great health benefits for the child. For breastfeeding information or support, contact your pediatrician, hospital or local health department.

FIND OUT YOUR FAMILY HISTORY

Women with a strong family history of cancer can take special steps to lower or manage their risk. You may be at high risk of breast cancer if you have a mother or sister who developed breast or ovarian cancer (especially at an early age) or if you have multiple family members (including males) who developed breast, ovarian or prostate cancer. A doctor or genetic counselor can help you understand your family history of the disease.
6. Avoid Birth Control Pills, Particularly After Age 35 or If You Smoke

Birth control pills have both risks and benefits. The younger a woman is, the lower the risks are. While women are taking birth control pills, they have a slightly increased risk of breast cancer. This risk goes away quickly after stopping the pill. The risk of stroke and heart attack is also increased while on the pill – particularly if a woman smokes. However, long-term use can also have important benefits, like lowering the risk of ovarian cancer, colon cancer and uterine cancer – not to mention unwanted pregnancy. So there’s also a lot in its favor. If you’re very concerned about breast cancer, avoiding birth control pills is one option to lower risk.

7. Avoid Menopausal Hormone Therapy

Menopausal hormone therapy shouldn’t be taken long term to prevent chronic diseases. Studies show it has a mixed effect on health, increasing the risk of some diseases and lowering the risk of others. And both estrogen-only hormones and estrogen-plus-progestin hormones increase the risk of breast cancer.

If women do take menopausal hormone therapy, it should be for the shortest time possible. The best person to talk to about the risks and benefits of menopausal hormone therapy is your doctor.

8. Tamoxifen and Raloxifene for Women at High Risk

Although not commonly thought of as a “healthy behavior,” taking the prescription drugs tamoxifen and raloxifene can significantly lower the risk of breast cancer in women at high risk of the disease. Approved by the FDA for breast cancer prevention, these powerful drugs can have side effects, so they aren’t right for everyone. If you think you’re at high risk, talk to your doctor to see if tamoxifen or raloxifene may be right for you.

**Know Your Risk. Change Your Future**

Visit yourdiseaserisk.wustl.edu and, with just a few clicks or taps, get a personal estimate of your breast cancer risk and custom prevention tips.
Online Resources

Your Disease Risk
yourdiseaserisk.wustl.edu

8ight Ways to Prevent Cancer
8ways.wustl.edu

American Cancer Society
cancer.org

CDC–Family Health History
cdc.gov/genomics/famhistory

National Cancer Institute
cancer.gov

SmokeFree.gov
smokefree.gov

La Leche League
llli.org

CDC–Healthy Weight, Nutrition, and Physical Activity
cdc.gov/healthyweight

For more information about Siteman Cancer Center and our locations, visit siteman.wustl.edu or call 800-600-3606.

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