

Reducing Your Risk of Cancer: Lifestyle Changes and Screening Tests

Frequently Asked Questions

What is cancer?

Normal cells in the body grow, divide, and are replaced on a routine basis. Sometimes, cells divide abnormally and begin to grow out of control. These cells may form growths or tumors.

Tumors can be benign (not cancer) or malignant (cancer). Benign tumors do not spread to other body tissues. Cancer tumors can invade and destroy nearby healthy tissues and organs. Cancer cells can also spread to other parts of the body and form new cancerous areas.

What are the warning signs of cancer?

Certain changes in your body may be signs of cancer, including:

- a change in bowel or bladder habits
- a sore that does not heal
- unusual vaginal bleeding or discharge
- thickening or a lump in the breast or other parts of the body
- skin changes, including a wart or mole that changes in color or size

- indigestion or trouble swallowing
- a nagging cough or hoarseness
- unexplained weight loss
- extreme tiredness (fatigue) even after sleep

These are not always signs of cancer, but they can be clues that something is wrong. If you notice something different in how your body looks or feels, contact your [obstetrician–gynecologist \(ob-gyn\)](#) .

How can I reduce my overall risk of cancer?

The following steps may reduce your risk of cancer:

- Stop smoking ([read advice on how to quit](#)).
- Get cancer [screening tests](#) and [vaccines](#) as recommended for your age group and health history. The [human papillomavirus \(HPV\)](#) vaccine protects against cervical cancer and other types of cancer. ([Learn more about the HPV vaccine.](#))
- Limit your time in the sun, use sunscreen, and do not use tanning beds.
- Limit how much [alcohol](#) you drink to no more than one drink per day.
- Limit your number of sexual partners.
- Stay at a healthy weight. [Body mass index \(BMI\)](#) is a tool that is used to measure body fat based on height and weight. To find out your BMI, you can use an [online calculator](#). A person with a BMI of 18.5 to 24.9 is at a normal weight.
- Maintain a [healthy diet](#). Limit how much processed and red meat you eat. Have at least 2 to 3 cups of fruits and vegetables daily. Choose brown rice and whole wheat bread instead of white rice and white bread.
- [Exercise regularly](#). Get 150 minutes of moderate exercise or 75 minutes of intense exercise per week.

Also, some [birth control](#) methods, including [combined hormonal birth control](#) and the [birth control injection](#), reduce the risk of certain types of cancer. Talk with your ob-gyn about the possible benefits and risks of different birth control methods.

What types of cancer are common in women?

Some common types of cancer in women include the following:

- Breast cancer
- Lung cancer
- [Colon](#) cancer
- Endometrial cancer (cancer of the [endometrium](#) , the lining of the [uterus](#))
- Skin cancer (including melanoma)
- Ovarian cancer (cancer of the [ovary](#))
- Cervical cancer (cancer of the [cervix](#))
- Vulvar cancer (cancer of the [vulva](#))

How can I reduce my risk of breast cancer?

The main risk factors for breast cancer—being a woman and getting older—cannot be controlled. But there are some things you can do that may lower your risk of breast cancer:

- Stay at a healthy weight. A person with a BMI of 18.5 to 24.9 is at a normal weight.
- Exercise regularly. Get 150 minutes of moderate exercise or 75 minutes of intense exercise per week.
- Limit or avoid alcohol.

Breastfeeding may also lower your risk of breast cancer.

What should I know about mammograms?

[Mammography](#) screens for breast cancer. Finding breast cancer early makes it easier to treat. If you are at average risk of breast cancer, you should be offered mammography starting at age 40. If you have not started screening in your 40s, you should begin having mammography no later than 50. Screening should be done every 1 to 2 years until at least 75.

You may need more frequent screening if you are at high risk of breast cancer (for example, if you have [BRCA1 and BRCA2 gene mutations](#)) . You and your ob-gyn should talk together about what age to begin screening. Read [Mammography and Other Screening Tests for Breast Problems](#) for more information.

How can I reduce my risk of lung cancer?

Most cases of lung cancer are caused by cigarette smoking. The best way to protect yourself from lung cancer is to not smoke. As soon as you stop smoking, your risk will begin to decrease. You should also avoid being around people who are smoking.

How can I quit smoking?

Ask your ob-gyn for advice on how to quit or call [1-800-QUIT-NOW](tel:1-800-QUIT-NOW). This national network for quitting smoking will connect you to counselors in your state. These counselors can offer resources and advice about quitting. Read [It's Time to Quit Smoking](#) to learn more.

Is there screening for lung cancer?

Yes. If you are between ages 50 and 80 with a history of smoking, ask your ob-gyn or other health care professional about annual screening for lung cancer. Screening is recommended for those who are currently heavy smokers or who have quit within the past 15 years.

How can I reduce my risk of colon cancer?

Colon cancer often begins as a [polyp](#). Routine screenings can help detect polyps before they become cancer. Removing precancerous polyps can prevent colon cancer. The American Cancer Society recommends getting a colon cancer screening test starting at age 45. These tests may include:

Tests that look through the colon with a small camera

- [Colonoscopy](#)
- [Sigmoidoscopy](#)

X-ray tests

- [Virtual colonoscopy](#)

Tests that examine stool for blood or abnormal genetic material

- [Fecal occult blood test](#)

- DNA stool test

Talk with your ob-gyn about which screening test is right for you. Also, limiting how much processed and red meat you eat and having at least 2 to 3 cups of fruits and vegetables every day may reduce your risk of colon cancer.

How can I reduce my risk of endometrial cancer?

Most cases of cancer that affect the lining of the uterus cannot be prevented. But there are a few steps you can take that may reduce your risk:

- Stay at a healthy weight. A person with a BMI of 18.5 to 24.9 is at a normal weight.
- Exercise regularly. Get 150 minutes of moderate exercise or 75 minutes of intense exercise per week.
- Get treated for any endometrial problems before they become cancer. Symptoms of problems can include spotting or bleeding outside of your [menstrual period](#) or after [menopause](#). Treatments may include birth control pills, [progestin](#) pills or injection, an [intrauterine device \(IUD\)](#) that releases progestin, or a vaginal [progesterone](#) cream.
- Talk with your ob-gyn if you have a strong family history of cancer. A genetic condition known as [Lynch syndrome](#) may increase your risk of endometrial cancer and other types of cancer.

How can I reduce my risk of skin cancer?

- Avoid being out in the sun, especially between 9 am and 3 pm standard time (10 am and 4 pm daylight saving time).
- Use sunscreen that has both UVA and UVB protection and a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 30.
- Wear sunglasses that block UV rays, clothing that covers your arms and legs, and hats that shade your head and neck.
- Do not use tanning beds or sun lamps.

- Watch the moles and spots on your skin. Tell your ob-gyn if you notice any changes. Ask for a skin exam during your regular check-ups.

How can I reduce my risk of ovarian cancer?

Ovarian cancer is hard to detect, so you should be aware of changes in your body. See your ob-gyn if you have any of these symptoms for more than a few weeks:

- Abdominal swelling or pain
- Pelvic pain
- Difficulty eating or feeling full quickly

There are some medical treatments that may reduce your risk:

- **Birth Control Pills**—Using birth control pills lowers the risk of ovarian cancer. The benefit is greater if you have used the pill for several years. Talk with your ob-gyn about the possible benefits and risks of taking birth control pills.
- **Surgery**—If you're at high risk of ovarian cancer, you may consider surgery to remove the ovaries and [fallopian tubes](#). This surgery may reduce the risk of cancer. Factors that put you at high risk include a history of ovarian cancer, [BRCA1 and BRCA2 gene mutations](#), or Lynch syndrome. The timing of surgery may depend on your desire to have children in the future. If you're at average risk of ovarian cancer and already having abdominal surgery for another reason, you may also consider surgery to remove the fallopian tubes.

How can I reduce my risk of cervical cancer?

- Have cervical cancer screening. Screening can find cervical problems early, before they become cancer. Screening may include the [Pap test](#), an HPV test, or both, depending on your age and health history. Read [Cervical Cancer Screening](#) for details.
- Get vaccinated. The HPV vaccine is given as a series of shots and protects against the HPV types that are the most common cause of cancer, precancer, and genital warts. Vaccination works best when it is done before a person is sexually active and exposed to HPV. But vaccination can still reduce the risk of getting HPV for people

who have already been sexually active. Read [Human Papillomavirus \(HPV\) Vaccination](#) for details on who can get the vaccine.

- Stop smoking. Smoking can affect your risk of getting HPV.
- Use condoms. Condoms help prevent HPV infection, but they do not give full protection.

How can I reduce my risk of vulvar cancer?

There is no screening for cancer of the vulva, so be aware of common symptoms. These include itching, burning, or abnormal skin that may be bumpy, smooth, or a different color like white, brown, or red. Precancerous changes to vulvar skin are often caused by HPV infection. You can reduce your risk of cancer of the vulva by taking the following steps:

- Get the [HPV vaccine](#).
- Stop smoking. Smoking increases your risk of getting vulvar cancer.

Glossary

Birth Control: Devices or medications used to prevent pregnancy.

Body Mass Index (BMI): A number calculated from height and weight that is used to determine whether a person is underweight, normal weight, overweight, or obese.

BRCA1 and BRCA2: Genes that keep cells from growing too rapidly. Changes in these genes have been linked to an increased risk of breast cancer and ovarian cancer.

Cervix: The lower, narrow end of the uterus at the top of the vagina.

Colon: The large intestine.

Colonoscopy: An exam of the large intestine using a small, lighted instrument.

Endometrium: The lining of the uterus.

Fallopian Tubes: Tubes through which an egg travels from the ovary to the uterus.

Fecal Occult Blood Test: A test in which a sample of stool is tested for blood, which could be a sign of cancer of the colon or rectum.

Gene: A segment of DNA that contains instructions for the development of a person's physical traits and control of the processes in the body. The gene is the basic unit of heredity and can be passed from parent to child.

Human Papillomavirus (HPV): The name for a group of related viruses, some of which cause genital warts and some of which are linked to cancer of the cervix, vulva, vagina, penis, anus, mouth, and throat.

Lynch Syndrome: A genetic condition that increases a person's risk of cancer of the colon, rectum, ovary, uterus, pancreas, and bile duct.

Intrauterine Device (IUD): A small device that is inserted and left inside the uterus to prevent pregnancy.

Mammography: X-rays of the breast that are used to find breast cancer or other breast problems.

Menopause: The time when a woman's menstrual periods stop permanently. Menopause is confirmed after 1 year of no periods.

Menstrual Period: The monthly shedding of blood and tissue from the uterus.

Mutations: Changes in a gene that can be passed from parent to child.

Obstetrician–Gynecologist (Ob-Gyn): A doctor with special training and education in women's health.

Ovary: An organ in women that contains the eggs necessary to get pregnant and makes important hormones, such as estrogen, progesterone, and testosterone.

Pap Tests: Tests in which cells are taken from the cervix (or vagina) to look for signs of cancer.

Polyp: An abnormal tissue growth that can develop on the inside of an organ.

Progestin: A synthetic form of progesterone that is similar to the hormone made naturally by the body.

Progesterone: A female hormone that is made in the ovaries and prepares the lining of the uterus for pregnancy.

Screening Tests: Tests that look for possible signs of disease in people who do not have signs or symptoms.

Sigmoidoscopy: A test in which a slender device is placed into the rectum and lower colon to look for cancer.

Uterus: A muscular organ in the female pelvis. During pregnancy, this organ holds and nourishes the fetus. Also called the womb.

Vaccines: Substances that help the body fight disease. Vaccines are made from very small amounts of weak or dead agents that cause disease (bacteria, toxins, and viruses).

Vulva: The external female genital area.

If you have further questions, contact your ob-gyn.

Don't have an ob-gyn? [Learn how to find a doctor near you.](#)

FAQ508

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