

Breast Cancer Prevention

OUR RISK OF BREAST CANCER CAN BE HUGELY REDUCED BY MAKING A FEW SIMPLE LIFESTYLE CHANGES, SAYS **DR JAMES READ**

health



In westernised countries, approximately one in eight women will contract breast cancer at some point in their life.

It's a terrifying statistic for most women and their families, but given the right information and motivation most women can actually avoid breast cancer – and other chronic diseases at the same time. Have we found the new gene to target with a wonder drug to cure this modern demon? No, we haven't. What about a test detecting breast cancer that is less uncomfortable than a mammogram? The answer, again, is no.

However, many women don't realise that they can help themselves when it comes to breast cancer prevention, and it is simple and cheap: lifestyle change.

Did you know that Asian women living a traditional lifestyle have breast cancer rates that are between 1/4 and 1/7 of that in the west? However, when these women migrate to the United States, their breast cancer rates become the same as the general population within two generations. It appears that it is sometimes lifestyle – not necessarily genetics – that is a large contributor to breast cancer.

In fact, genetic factors contribute to as few as 3% of breast cancer cases, and some women are not genetically predestined to contract breast cancer at all. Although several genes have been identified as causing a high risk of developing breast cancer, these are rare, occurring in just one in 500 women,

So, although a family history of breast cancer in close relatives does increase a woman's risk, it by no means implies that she is destined to be burdened with the disease. What it really implies is that her lifestyle choices become more critical.

Women can reduce their risk of breast cancer to less than 1/3 through a combination of lifestyle-related changes. Although there is hype around hormone replacement therapy and preventative mastectomy, approximately 40% of breast cancers can be prevented by maintaining a healthy weight, increasing physical activity and reducing alcohol consumption alone.

So what are the risks of developing breast cancer and what can you do to protect yourself?

Lifestyle changes include:

- A healthier diet
- Physical activity of a moderate intensity (45 minutes, five times a week is recommended)
- Adequate sleep
- Adequate sunlight for vitamin D
- Breast feeding
- Quitting smoking

Diet changes include:

- Increasing fruit and vegetable intake
- Increasing fibre intake
- Increasing soy, phytoestrogens (found in beans, seeds and grains) and fish, fish oil and iodine.
- Reducing excess body weight

Risk factors for breast cancer include early puberty and late menopause (which can be prevented by the diet changes mentioned). Use of the oral contraceptive pill has also been shown to increase this risk in some cases, and oestrogen-mimicking toxins such as pesticides and bisphenol A (BPA), which is found in many everyday products, are also known breast cancer triggers.

These risks sound scary, but they can be offset by some of the changes mentioned already. Early puberty can even be delayed by some of these changes, because they reduce oestrogen exposure.

Of course, these lifestyle changes are no guarantee, but they will make a difference to your overall health, thus helping reduce potential risk. You may need to put down your glass of wine and pick up your running shoes, but it could save you running to the doctor.

A gentle dose of early morning sunshine can do wonders for your Vitamin D intake, and is a lot easier than the harsh rays of radiotherapy. Things like broccoli may also be hard to swallow at first for young girls, but you'll find it's a less bitter pill than chemotherapy.

If you're not convinced yet, these changes can also help to prevent other causes of cancer, including bowel and lung cancer, and the greatest killer of women – cardiovascular disease.

So have fun (exercising in the sun), chase this down with a blueberry soy smoothie, followed by a veggie and tofu stir fry, and sleep well.

Dr James Read is an Australian rural general practitioner and retired flying doctor, with a Fellowship of Nutritional and Environment Medicine. He teaches this speciality internationally, and works at Complete Healthcare International in Singapore.