

## Reducing Your Risk of Breast and Ovarian Cancer

### *Lifestyle changes that can help*

*This handout explains how exercise, diet, alcohol use, and stress can affect your health. It includes tips on how to make lifestyle changes to reduce your risk of getting cancer.*

### Ways to Prevent Cancer

There are 3 main ways to reduce your risk of breast or ovarian cancer:

- Make lifestyle changes as needed to lower your risk.
- Reduce your exposure to cancer-causing agents.
- If you are at very high risk, consider preventive medicine or surgery.

Of these options, lifestyle changes are something everyone can do.

You can reduce your risk of breast and ovarian cancer when you live a healthier lifestyle. Doing this has a double bonus: you will have a lower risk of cancer, and enjoy better health in other ways, too.



*Lifestyle changes begin when we become aware of something that we want to change.*

### How to Make Change Happen

When people successfully make changes, they usually do it in steps. They:

- Become aware that they might want to make a change
- Decide to change
- Learn how to change
- Make the change in a way that works for them
- Maintain the change for months and longer

If you find that you are interested in reading this handout, you are already well on your way toward any lifestyle changes you wish to make.

## **Exercise to Reduce Cancer Risk**

Studies show that women who exercise more have less breast cancer. Exercise may reduce risk in several ways by:

- Lowering levels of the hormone estrogen in the body
- Reducing fat tissue in the body
- Improving the immune system, which may help limit tumor growth

Exercise is also key in maintaining calorie balance and a healthy weight (see “Maintain a Healthy Weight” on page 4). Healthcare providers advise 30 minutes or more of moderate exercise on most days of the week.

You can divide this 30 minutes over the course of the day. For example, you might walk for 10 minutes to get to work, walk for 10 minutes to get home, and then have 10 minutes of activity in the evening.

### ***Tips for Change***

Some people find it helpful to set exercise goals and reward themselves when they meet them.

- When setting goals, make them specific, realistic, and flexible. For example, the goal to “walk 30 minutes every day” is specific and may be realistic, but it isn’t flexible. What if it rains on a day you have no umbrella? A better goal would be: “Walk 30 minutes at least 4 days this week.” This goal is specific, realistic, and flexible.
- Reward yourself for meeting your goals. Rewards can be any non-food item you enjoy. Buying a new CD or setting time aside for yourself are examples of good rewards.

If you decide to exercise more, choose activities you will stick with. Consider getting an exercise buddy. You can encourage each other and enjoy each other’s company.

Start easy and build up slowly to avoid muscle soreness. In a few weeks, you’ll find that exercise has another benefit – it makes you feel good!

## **Eat for Life**

A healthy diet can lower your risk of breast and ovarian cancer as well as risk of other cancers. To lower your cancer risk, choose a diet that:

- Is low in fat, with 15% to 30% of calories from fat. This means you might eat some foods that are high in fat, but other foods that days should be lower in fat to keep your total fat low.
- Contains enough calories for your activity level, without adding weight.
- Is high in natural fiber with foods like whole grains, fruits, and vegetables.

- Contains fats that are mostly unsaturated and come from plants. Plant-based fats include avocado, nuts, seeds, olives, and coconut, soy, olive, and sesame oil.
- Includes 5 or more servings a day of fruits and vegetables. Studies show that people who eat *cruciferous* vegetables at least once a week have a lower risk of most cancers than people who never or rarely ate these veggies. *Cruciferous* vegetables include broccoli, cabbage, kale, cauliflower, and Brussels sprouts.

### **Diet, Estrogen, and Pollutants**

Too much exposure to the hormone estrogen is believed to increase the risk for breast cancer. Your food choices can make a difference:

- Limit foods that contain estrogen and *pollutants* (toxins in the environment).
- Eat a high-fiber diet. Estrogen is excreted by the bowel.

We do not yet know the effect of the plant estrogens (*phytoestrogens*) that are found in soy foods. We do know that soy nuts, tofu, and soymilk may help ease some menopausal symptoms. **In moderate amounts, they are not likely to increase risk of breast cancer.**

But, women who have or are at high risk of breast cancer should avoid large doses of phytoestrogens in pill or powder form until we know more about their effects.

### **Benefits of Plant-Based Eating**

- Fat-soluble toxins in the environment are less likely to be concentrated in fats from plants than they are in animal fats such as lard and butter.
- Cruciferous vegetables like cabbage and broccoli reduce mammary cancer in animals. They may also reduce cancer risk in humans.

#### ***Tips for Change***

- Read the Nutrition Facts labels on packaged food. Check their fiber content, the percent of calories from fat, and the kinds of fat they contain.
- Make changes slowly. For example, if you currently drink whole milk (about 4% fat), try going to 2% milk. After a while, then try 1% or nonfat milk. In time, whole milk will taste like cream!

### **Keep a Healthy Weight**

Weight gain after menopause has been linked to a higher risk of breast cancer. The body can make estrogen in fat tissue. To help reduce your risk of breast cancer, keep a healthy weight. Get plenty of exercise, eat healthy foods, and eat the right number of calories for your height and body type.

### ***Tips for Change***

There are 3 ways to reduce weight:

- Increase your activity, which burns more calories.
- Eat less (take in fewer calories).
- Do both of the above.

Most people who have long-term success with losing weight do it slowly, over months, and increase their activity level with exercise (see “Exercise to Reduce Cancer Risk” on page 2). They may also combine exercise and a low-fat diet.

When changing your diet, it is easier and perhaps safer to change the kinds of food you eat and the way you eat, instead of trying to lose a certain amount of weight:

- Try eating slowly. It takes 15 to 20 minutes for the brain to get the message that you have eaten.
- Fruits and vegetables can help you feel full.
- Small plates make portions seem bigger.
- Find healthy foods you enjoy. Use these to replace less healthy ones.
- Eat on a regular basis. Do not starve yourself.

## **Limit Alcohol**

Drinking alcohol increases breast cancer risk. It may increase ovarian cancer risk, too. Even about 1 drink a day has been reported to double breast cancer risk. Drinking more than that adds to the risk. If you do drink alcohol, have less than 1 drink a day.

### ***Tips for Change***

If you find it hard to control your drinking, learn what situations tempt you to drink more than you would like. Avoid these, and do other activities instead. Many people are able to reduce or stop using alcohol after trying several times.

Do **not** drink alcohol to reduce stress. See “Reduce Stress,” below.

## **Reduce Stress**

Stress is linked to lung infections and diseases of the gastrointestinal, heart, and autoimmune systems. And, some studies show that women who develop breast cancer are more affected by stressful events than women who do not develop breast cancer. Stress may affect tumor growth by changing hormone levels and the immune system.

Because of this, it is useful to know how to deal with stress. None of us chooses the amount of stress in our lives, but we can limit its effects. Many people find these methods helpful:

- Develop your support network. Find friends, family, and other helpers who can help you make the lifestyle changes you want to make.
- Learn to gladly accept, and give, help.
- Learn relaxation methods like meditation, yoga, prayer, or slow, deep breathing. Use them when needed.
- Talk with a counselor or psychologist who specializes in stress reduction.
- Work to adopt a lifestyle that promotes mild or moderate, but not severe, levels of stress.
- Enjoy exercise.
- Engage in activities that give you joy.

## Other Cancers

Breast and ovarian cancer may be your main cancer concerns, but you can also reduce your risk of other cancers. In addition to the other suggestions in this handout:

- Do **not** smoke.
- Avoid too much sun exposure. Use sunscreen when you go outside.

## More Resources

Here is very helpful book about lifestyle and exercise changes for reducing risk:

*Breast Fitness: An Optimal Exercise and Health Plan for Reducing Your Risk of Breast Cancer* by Anne McTiernan, MD, PhD; Julie Gralow, MD; and Lisa Talbott. St. Martins Press, 2001.

### Questions?

Women's Health Care Center,  
Roosevelt Clinic:  
206.598.5500

Seattle Cancer Care Alliance  
(SCCA): 206.606.7300

The Rivkin Center for Ovarian  
Cancer: 206.215.6200