

Women and Cancer

Your guide
to reducing your
risk of cancer



About 57,000 Australian women are diagnosed with cancer each year.

The most common cancers in women are skin, breast, bowel and lung cancers.

The good news is that there are steps you can take to reduce your risk of getting cancer, or to help find cancer early when there is a greater likelihood of remission or cure.

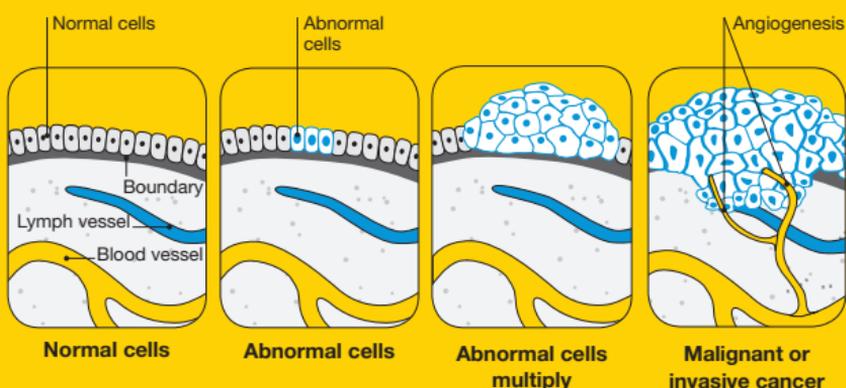
This brochure provides information about the cancers common in women, healthy lifestyle tips to lower your risk of cancer, and advice about what you can do at various stages of your life to help find cancer early.

What is cancer?

Cancer is a disease of the cells, which are the body's basic building blocks. The body constantly makes new cells to help us grow, replace worn-out tissue and heal injuries. Normally, cells multiply and die in an orderly way.

Sometimes cells don't grow, divide and die in the usual way. This may cause blood or lymph fluid in the body to become abnormal or form a lump called a tumour. A tumour can be benign (not cancer) or malignant (cancer).

How cancer starts



Reducing your cancer risk

There is no way to guarantee you won't get cancer, but about one-third of cancers can be prevented by making healthy lifestyle choices. Cancer Council recommends you:

Quit smoking or, better still, never start; and avoid second-hand smoke.



Maintain a healthy weight.

Protect yourself from the sun in 5 ways: slip on clothing that covers your shoulders, arms and legs; slop on sunscreen; slap on a hat; seek shade; and slide on sunglasses.



Be physically active. Aim for 60 minutes of moderate exercise or 30 minutes of vigorous exercise most days or every day.



Limit your alcohol intake. The recommended intake is an average of no more than 2 standard drinks a day.

Eat moderate amounts of lean red meat, and limit or avoid processed meats.



Enjoy plenty of fruit and vegetables. Aim for 2 serves of fruit and 5 serves of vegetables or legumes a day.

Eat a variety of wholegrain, wholemeal and other high-fibre foods, such as cereals, breads, rice and pasta. Aim for at least 4–6 serves a day.

Choose a diet low in salt and fat.

A small amount of fat is essential for good health and can be found in foods such as avocado, nuts, seeds and oily fish.



Get to know your body and what is normal for you. See your doctor if you notice any changes.

Have recommended screening tests.

What is cancer screening?

Screening is testing for cancer or precancerous changes in people who don't have symptoms. There are national screening programs for breast, bowel and cervical cancers – see the relevant sections in this brochure for information.



Breast cancer

The exact cause of breast cancer is unknown, but there are some things that can increase your risk. These include: being older than 50 (although breast cancer can be diagnosed at any age); having a close relative (mother, sister, daughter) with breast cancer, especially if they were diagnosed before the age of 50; and having a relative who has been diagnosed with ovarian cancer.

Some types of breast cancer are caused by faulty genes, such as BRCA1 and BRCA2. These genetic faults are not common causes of breast cancer, and not every woman with a faulty gene will develop breast cancer.

Breast cancer is the most common cancer diagnosed in Australian women after skin cancer. Each year, more than 15,000 women are diagnosed.

Evidence shows that taking HRT (hormone replacement therapy) can also increase the risk of breast cancer. If you take HRT, talk to your doctor about your risk.

Having these risk factors does not mean you will develop breast cancer.



Reducing your risk of breast cancer

Maintain a healthy weight – Being overweight or obese increases the risk of breast cancer, particularly for women who have been through menopause.

Be physically active – Regular exercise can reduce the risk of breast cancer, particularly in women who have been through menopause. Physical activity can also help you maintain a healthy weight.

Limit your alcohol intake – Drinking alcohol can increase the risk of breast cancer. If you choose to drink, limit your intake to no more than 2 standard drinks a day.

Finding breast cancer early

Early detection of breast cancer can lead to treatment that will remove the cancer and reduce the risk of it coming back (recurring). Regularly examining your breasts and having regular screening tests can help find breast cancer early.

To examine your breasts, study them in a mirror and feel them from time to time. Knowing what is normal for you will help you find any new or unusual changes. See your doctor straightaway if you notice:

- a new lump or lumpiness, especially if it's in only one breast
- changes in the size or shape of the breast
- changes to the nipple, such as crusting, ulcers or sores, redness or inversion
- a clear or bloody discharge from the nipple that occurs without squeezing
- changes in the skin of the breast, such as redness or dimpling
- swelling or discomfort in the armpit
- persistent unusual pain in the breast.

Breast cancer screening

Screening for breast cancer involves having a mammogram every two years from the age of 50. If you have a close relative who was diagnosed with breast cancer before the age of 50, talk to your doctor about starting screening earlier.

Women aged 50–74 should have a mammogram every two years. Call BreastScreen Australia on **13 20 50** to book a free mammogram.

Women aged 40–49 and 75 or older may also have free screening mammograms. Ask your doctor whether you should be screened.



Skin cancer

Skin cancer is the most commonly diagnosed cancer in Australia, which has one of the highest rates of skin cancer in the world. The three main types of skin cancer are basal cell carcinoma, squamous cell carcinoma and melanoma, which is the most dangerous form of the disease.

Ultraviolet (UV) radiation from the sun causes most skin cancers, so protecting yourself in the sun is the simplest and best way to lower your risk. When UV levels are 3 or above – that is, high enough to cause permanent skin damage – practise the following sun protection measures:

- **Slip** on clothing that covers your shoulders, arms and legs. Choose shirts with collars, high necks and sleeves; and pants, long skirts or long shorts.
- **Slop** on SPF30+ or SPF50+ broad-spectrum water-resistant sunscreen. Apply 20 minutes before going outside and reapply every 2 hours.
- **Slap** on a broad-brimmed, bucket or legionnaire-style hat that protects your face, ears and neck.
- **Seek** shade whenever you can.
- **Slide** on sunglasses that meet Australian/New Zealand Standard AS/NZS 1067:2003 and fit your face well.



Finding skin cancer early

Most skin cancers can be treated successfully if found early. There is no screening program for skin cancer, so getting to know your own skin will help you notice any new or changing spots, moles or freckles. Check your:

- head, scalp, neck and ears
- torso on the front, sides and back
- arms, hands, fingers and fingernails
- toes, toenails and soles of your feet.

See your doctor if you have:

- a new spot or lump
- an unusual freckle, mole or sunspot
- a sore that doesn't heal
- a spot that looks different from other spots around it
- a spot that has changed colour, size or shape, has an irregular border, or becomes itchy or bleeds.

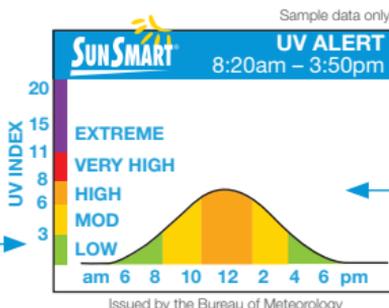
The SunSmart UV Alert

This useful tool tells you when the UV Index will be 3 or above and sun protection measures are required. You can check the SunSmart UV Alert daily at cancercouncil.com.au/sunsmartuvalert, in many newspapers or using the free SunSmart app.

How to read the Alert

UV Index ranges

- Low (0–2)
- Moderate (3–5)
- High (6–7)
- Very High (8–10)
- Extreme (11+)



This shows when you need to be SunSmart on this day.

The maximum UV Index level on this day is forecast to be 7, which is high.



Bowel cancer

About 7500 Australian women are diagnosed with bowel cancer each year.

The risk of developing bowel cancer increases with age. It is most common in women over 50, although younger women can also get bowel cancer. Other risk factors include a history of bowel polyps, and having ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease, particularly if you have had it for more than eight years.

A family history of bowel cancer can also increase your risk. Talk to your doctor if a close relative (e.g. a parent or sibling) has had bowel cancer, especially if they were younger than 55 when they were diagnosed. A small number of bowel cancers are caused by genetic conditions. Discuss your bowel cancer risk with your doctor.

Finding bowel cancer early

Bowel cancer can be treated successfully if it is detected early. However, most early-stage bowel cancers do not have symptoms, and fewer than 40% of bowel cancers are detected in their early stages. Don't let embarrassment stop you from getting checked.



Reducing your risk of bowel cancer

There is no way to guarantee that you won't get bowel cancer, but the following measures can help reduce the risk:

- Be physically active
- Don't smoke
- Maintain a healthy weight
- Limit your alcohol intake to no more than 2 standard drinks a day
- Eat 5 serves of vegetables or legumes and 2 serves of fruit a day
- Eat moderate amounts of lean red meat, and limit or avoid processed meats
- Eat at least 4–6 serves of wholegrain, wholemeal and high-fibre cereals, breads and pasta each day
- Take part in the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program

Symptoms of bowel cancer include:

- blood in a bowel motion, in the toilet bowl or on toilet paper. If you are over 50, check after each bowel motion
- changes in bowel habits, such as constipation, diarrhoea, or smaller, more frequent bowel movements
- a feeling that the bowel hasn't completely emptied after a bowel movement
- a feeling of fullness or bloating in the bowel or rectum
- rectal or anal pain.

Not everyone with these symptoms has bowel cancer. If you have symptoms, see your doctor, who may refer you for tests.

Bowel cancer screening

Bowel cancer testing kits, known as faecal occult blood tests or FOBTs, can find microscopic blood in a bowel motion that may indicate there is a problem. Many pharmacists sell testing kits, or your doctor can arrange for a kit to be sent to you. Many people receive a free kit as part of the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program.

National Bowel Cancer Screening Program

Many people aged 50 and older who hold a Medicare or Department of Veterans' Affairs card are automatically sent a free FOBT kit as part of the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program. The test involves using the kit to take samples from two separate bowel motions (faeces) and then mailing them to a pathology laboratory for testing.

If blood is found in your bowel motion (a positive result), you will be referred to your doctor for further tests to check for bowel cancer. A positive result does not necessarily mean you have bowel cancer.

For more information about the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program, call **1800 118 868** or visit **cancerscreening.gov.au**.



Lung cancer

About 4900 women are diagnosed with lung cancer in Australia each year.

Smoking causes about 65% of lung cancers in women, although some women who develop lung cancer have never smoked. Exposure to other people's smoke (passive smoking) also increases the risk of lung cancer.

Other risk factors include: being over 60; having a family history of lung cancer or a personal history of lung disease, such as chronic bronchitis; and exposure to substances or particles such as asbestos, coal gas and radiation.

Talk to your doctor if you are concerned about your lung cancer risk.

Finding lung cancer early

Lung cancer can be difficult to diagnose at an early stage. Sometimes there are no symptoms and the cancer is detected during routine tests, such as an x-ray or CT scan.

Whether you smoke or not, see your doctor if you have any of the following symptoms:

- a persistent cough (lasting longer than 3 weeks)
- a change in a cough
- coughing up blood.

Having any of these symptoms does not necessarily mean you have lung cancer.

Smoking and women

Smoking increases the risk of developing many cancers, including uterine, cervical and ovarian cancers. Women who smoke are more likely to experience painful periods, problems conceiving, early menopause and osteoporosis.

Smoking during pregnancy increases the risk of having low birth-weight babies and babies who are premature, stillborn or who die shortly after birth.

Quitting can be difficult, so speak to your doctor, call the Quitline on **13 7848**, or visit **icanquit.com.au**.



Cancer of the uterus

Cancer of the uterus is the most commonly diagnosed gynaecological cancer in Australian women. About 2600 women are diagnosed each year.

Cancer of the uterus is also known as uterine cancer, womb cancer, cancer of the lining of the womb or endometrial cancer.

The exact cause of cancer of the uterus is unknown, but some factors seem to increase a woman's risk:

- overweight or obesity
- diabetes
- physical inactivity
- age over 50
- a family history of uterine, ovarian, breast or bowel cancer
- being postmenopausal
- taking oestrogen hormone replacement without progesterone
- taking tamoxifen for breast cancer. While taking tamoxifen slightly increases the risk of cancer of the uterus, its benefits for treating breast cancer usually outweigh the risk.

Many women who have risk factors don't get cancer of the uterus, and some women who do get it have none of these risk factors.

Finding cancer of the uterus early

Symptoms of cancer of the uterus include:

- unusual vaginal bleeding, especially after menopause
- a watery discharge
- heavy, irregular periods after the age of 40.

These symptoms can occur for other reasons. See your doctor if you are concerned.



Cervical cancer

About 900 women are diagnosed with cervical cancer in Australia each year. Cancer of the cervix (the neck of the uterus) is one of the most preventable cancers.



Reducing your risk of cervical cancer

Get vaccinated – Almost all cases of cervical cancer are caused by infection with high-risk types of the human papillomavirus (HPV). This is the biggest risk factor for cervical cancer.

The HPV vaccine protects against the two types of HPV that are responsible for 70–80% of cervical cancers. The vaccine is offered free to all children aged 12–13 through a national vaccination program. It does not protect against all cervical cancers, so if you've been vaccinated, it's still important to have regular screening tests.

Stop smoking – Smoking produces chemicals that may damage the cells of the cervix and make cancer more likely to develop. Quitting smoking or, better still, never starting, will reduce your risk of cervical cancer. If you would like to quit, talk to your doctor, call the Quitline on **13 7848**, or visit **icanquit.com.au**.

Finding cervical cancer early

The best way to detect precancerous changes and early cervical cancer is to have regular screening tests – a Pap test or the new HPV test, which will be available in 2017.

National Cervical Screening Program

This program encourages women aged 18–70 who have ever had sex to have two-yearly Pap tests. From May 2017, women aged 25–74 will be tested for HPV every 5 years instead. Evidence has found that screening women for HPV is a more effective way of preventing cervical cancer.

It is important to continue having two-yearly Pap tests until the new HPV test is introduced in 2017.



Thyroid cancer

About 2000 Australian women are diagnosed with thyroid cancer each year. Women are almost three times more likely than men to develop thyroid cancer.

The thyroid gland is at the front of the neck below the voice box (larynx). It produces hormones that help control heart rate, blood pressure, body temperature and weight.

The exact cause of thyroid cancer is unknown, but factors that are known to increase the risk include:

- exposure to radiation, such as receiving radiotherapy treatment as a child
- a genetic mutation in the RET gene. If you have a family history of thyroid cancer, talk to a genetic counsellor or family cancer clinic, or call Cancer Council **13 11 20**.

Finding thyroid cancer early

Thyroid cancer can develop without obvious symptoms. Some people may experience a painless lump in the neck or throat, difficulty swallowing or breathing, a hoarse voice, or swollen lymph glands in the neck.

These symptoms don't necessarily mean you have thyroid cancer. See your doctor if you are concerned.





Ovarian cancer

About 1500 women are diagnosed with ovarian cancer in Australia each year.

The exact cause of ovarian cancer is unknown. Risk factors include: being over 50 and postmenopausal; never having children; having endometriosis; and lifestyle factors, such as smoking and being overweight.

Finding ovarian cancer early

There is no test for the early detection of ovarian cancer. Screening tests, such as the Pap test and new HPV test, don't detect ovarian cancer. The best thing you can do is to know your body so you can recognise any changes and be aware of the symptoms. These include:

- a swollen or bloated abdomen
- pain in the abdomen, pelvis or back
- loss of appetite or feeling full quickly
- changes in bowel habits, such as constipation and diarrhoea
- unexplained weight loss or gain
- indigestion or heartburn
- pain during sexual intercourse.

These symptoms are common to many conditions, and most women with them will not have ovarian cancer. If you experience any of these symptoms and they are unusual for you, see your doctor.

Some ovarian cancers are caused by a fault in the genes BRCA1 and BRCA2. Not all women with a faulty gene will develop ovarian cancer, but their risk is higher. Talk to your doctor if you are concerned.



Where to get help and information

- **Cancer Council 13 11 20 for Information and Support**

For confidential information and emotional support

- **Cancer Council website**

cancercouncil.com.au

Note to reader

Always consult your doctor about matters that affect your health. This brochure provides general information only and should not be seen as a substitute for medical advice. You should obtain independent advice relevant to your specific situation from appropriate professionals, and you may wish to discuss issues raised in this brochure with them.

All care is taken to ensure that the information in this brochure is accurate at the time of publication. Information on preventing cancer is constantly being updated by medical professionals and the research community. Cancer Council NSW excludes all liability for any injury, loss or damage incurred by use of or reliance on the information provided in this brochure.



153 Dowling Street
Woolloomooloo NSW 2011

feedback@nswcc.org.au
cancercouncil.com.au



[facebook.com/CancerCouncilNSW](https://www.facebook.com/CancerCouncilNSW)



[@CCNewSouthWales](https://twitter.com/CCNewSouthWales)



[youtube.com/user/CancerCouncilNSW1](https://www.youtube.com/user/CancerCouncilNSW1)



[ccnewsouthwales](https://www.instagram.com/ccnewsouthwales)