



# Women and Cancer

A guide to reducing your risk of cancer



For information and support, call  
**13 11 20** or visit [cancercouncil.com.au](http://cancercouncil.com.au)

# Finding cancer early

**It's estimated that about 69,000 new cases of cancer will be diagnosed in Australian women each year.<sup>†</sup> One in two women will be diagnosed with cancer by the age of 85.**

The good news is that there are steps you can take to reduce your risk of getting cancer or help find cancer early. The earlier cancer is found, the better the chances of successful treatment.

Many cancers can be treated successfully. About 70% of women with cancer will be alive five years after their diagnosis. Many of these women live much longer than that.

This brochure provides information about:

- common cancers in women
- healthy lifestyle tips to lower your risk of cancer
- steps you can take to help find cancer early.

## What is cancer?

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Cancer is a disease of the cells. Cells are the body's basic building blocks – they make up tissue and organs. 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, so that each new cell replaces one lost. Sometimes, cells become abnormal and keep growing. In solid cancers, such as breast cancer, the abnormal cells form a mass or lump called a tumour. In other cancers, such as leukaemia, the abnormal cells build up in the blood.

There are more than 200 different types of cancer. The most common cancers in women are non-melanoma skin (basal and squamous cell carcinomas), breast, bowel, melanoma, lung, uterine and thyroid.

<sup>†</sup> *Not including non-melanoma skin cancers*

# Reducing your risk

There is no way to guarantee you won't get cancer, but evidence shows that up to one-third of cancers can be prevented by making healthy lifestyle choices.



## Quit smoking

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There is no safe level of tobacco use – see page 10.



## Be SunSmart

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Protect yourself from the sun (slip, slop, slap, seek, slide) – see page 4.



## Maintain a healthy body weight

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Keep your weight within the healthy range and avoid weight gain as an adult and after menopause.



## Be physically active and sit less

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Aim for 60 minutes of moderate exercise or 30 minutes of vigorous exercise on most days.

## Reduce your alcohol intake

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Drinking alcohol increases the risk of many cancers. The more you drink, the greater your risk. If you drink alcohol, stick to the National Health and Medical Research Council guidelines (visit [nhmrc.gov.au](http://nhmrc.gov.au)).

## Eat well

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Eat plenty of vegetables, fruit and legumes, as well as a variety of wholegrain, wholemeal and high-fibre cereals, breads and pasta. Eat less red meat and avoid processed meat (e.g. ham, salami).

## Get vaccinated against HPV

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This can reduce the risk of developing cervical, anal, throat, vaginal and vulvar cancers. Since 2007, girls aged 12–13 have been offered the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine at school. The vaccine is recommended and free for people aged up to 19.

## Participate in cancer screening programs

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Australia has national screening programs for breast, bowel and cervical cancers (see pages 6, 8 and 14). These are currently the only cancers for which organised screening has been shown to be effective.

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This information brochure is based on guidance for female bodies. If you identify as non-binary or transgender, much of it will be relevant, but your experience may be different.

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# Skin cancer

**Australia has one of the highest rates of skin cancer in the world. It is the most commonly diagnosed cancer in Australia – each year over 440,000 people are treated for skin cancer.**

The three main types of skin cancer are melanoma, basal cell carcinoma (BCC) and squamous cell carcinoma (SCC). Melanoma is the most dangerous form of the disease. Each year, about 6700 women are diagnosed with melanoma in Australia.

## Reducing your risk

Exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation from the sun causes at least 95% of all skin cancers in Australia. Protecting yourself from the sun when you are outdoors is the simplest and best way of preventing melanoma and other skin cancers from occurring.

UV levels in NSW are high enough to damage unprotected skin at least 10 months of the year. Use the SunSmart app to check UV levels in your area. When UV levels are 3 or above – that is, high enough to cause permanent skin damage – use several of the sun protection measures listed below.

### Protect yourself from the sun



**SLIP** on clothing that covers your body



**SLOP** on SPF30+ or ideally SPF50+ broad-spectrum, water-resistant sunscreen



**SLAP** on a hat that protects your face, ears and neck



**SEEK** shade whenever you can



**SLIDE** on sunglasses that meet Australian/New Zealand Standards

## WHAT SHOULD I LOOK OUT FOR?



Signs to look out for include:

- a new spot or lump on the skin
- a spot that looks and feels different from other spots on your skin
- a sore that doesn't heal within a few weeks
- a spot that has changed size, shape, colour or texture, or becomes itchy or bleeds.

See your GP or dermatologist if you find any changes to your skin.

Your head is very vulnerable to sun damage – get in the habit of putting sunscreen on your face, neck and ears each morning after brushing your teeth. Keep a broad-brimmed hat within easy reach, such as near the front door or in the car.

Unlike other cancers, skin cancers are often visible to the naked eye, so you can check your own skin for signs of cancer (see below).

### **Finding skin cancer early**

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

Check your skin for changes regularly. In a room with good light, undress and use a full-length mirror to look closely at your:

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

To check areas that are difficult to see, use a handheld mirror or ask someone to help you.

# Breast cancer

**Breast cancer is the most common cancer diagnosed in Australian women – about 19,800 women are diagnosed each year.**

## Risk factors

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The exact cause of breast cancer is unknown, but some things can increase the chance of developing it. Breast cancer is most common in women aged 50 or older, but it can affect women of any age.

Other risk factors include having a mother or sister with breast or ovarian cancer, being overweight or gaining weight after menopause, drinking alcohol, and not being physically active.

A small number of women may have inherited a gene fault that increases their breast cancer risk. Using menopause hormone therapy (MHT) that contains both oestrogen and progesterone can also increase the risk of breast cancer. Having risk factors does not mean that you will develop breast cancer. Talk to your doctor if you are concerned.

### Breast cancer screening

Being screened for breast cancer when you don't have any symptoms can help find cancer early, when it is smaller and easier to treat.

Screening for breast cancer involves having a mammogram every two years from the age of 50 (or earlier if your GP advises it). A mammogram is a low-dose x-ray of the breast tissue. It can show changes that can't be felt during a physical examination.

BreastScreen NSW invites women aged 50–74 to have free mammograms. Call BreastScreen NSW on **13 20 50** to book a free mammogram or visit [breastscreen.nsw.gov.au](http://breastscreen.nsw.gov.au) for more information.

## WHAT SHOULD I LOOK OUT FOR?



Signs to look out for include:

- a new lump or lumpiness
- a change in the size or shape of the breast
- a change to the nipple, such as crusting, ulcers or sores, redness or inversion
- a clear or bloody discharge from the nipple that occurs without squeezing
- a change in the skin of the breast, such as redness or dimpling
- swelling or discomfort in the armpit.

Most breast changes aren't caused by cancer, but it is best to see your GP for a check-up.

## Reducing your risk

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Maintaining a healthy weight (particularly after menopause), being physically active and drinking less alcohol are the most important ways you can reduce your risk of breast cancer.

If you're aged 50–74, take part in the breast cancer screening program. If you have a strong family history of breast cancer or a genetic condition that can cause breast cancer, ask your GP whether you need to start screening at an earlier age.

## Finding breast cancer early

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Breast cancer can usually be treated successfully if it is found early. Regularly checking your breasts and having screening mammograms can help find breast cancer early.

To check your breasts for changes, look at 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.

# Bowel cancer

**Bowel (colorectal) cancer is a very common cancer in Australia. Every year, about 7100 women are diagnosed with bowel cancer in Australia.**

## Risk factors

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Bowel cancer usually develops from small growths on the bowel wall called polyps. Most polyps are harmless, but some become cancerous over time.

The risk of developing bowel cancer increases with age – bowel cancer is most common in people aged 50 or older, but it can affect women of any age. Women who have a parent or sibling with bowel cancer are more likely to develop the disease. Other risk factors include a history of bowel polyps or inflammatory bowel disease, being overweight, drinking alcohol, having an unhealthy diet and not being physically active. Genetic conditions cause a small number of bowel cancers.

## Bowel cancer screening

Being screened for bowel cancer when you don't have any symptoms can help find early changes in the bowel. Bowel cancer testing kits, known as immunochemical faecal occult blood tests or iFOBTs, can find microscopic traces of blood in a bowel motion that may indicate there is a problem.

Through the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program, eligible Australians aged 50–74 are automatically sent a free iFOBT kit every two years to complete at home. If blood is found in your bowel motion (a positive result), you will be referred to your GP for further tests. A positive result doesn't necessarily mean you have bowel cancer.

For more information or to check your eligibility, call **1800 627 701** or visit [cancerscreening.gov.au](https://cancerscreening.gov.au).



## WHAT SHOULD I LOOK OUT FOR?



Symptoms of bowel cancer include:

- blood in a bowel motion (poo), in the toilet bowl or on toilet paper
- changed bowel habits, such as constipation, diarrhoea or more frequent bowel motions
- a feeling that the bowel hasn't completely emptied after a bowel motion
- a feeling of fullness or bloating in the bowel
- pain in the rectum or anus.

These symptoms can occur for other reasons, but it is best to see your GP for a check-up.

## Reducing your risk

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Eating a nutritious diet is one of the most important ways you can reduce your risk of bowel cancer – cut out processed meat, eat less red meat, and eat plenty of wholegrains and high-fibre foods such as legumes, vegetables and fruit. Making other healthy lifestyle choices may also help reduce the risk. These include maintaining a healthy weight, being physically active, drinking less alcohol and not smoking. If you're aged 50–74, take part in the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program.

If you have a strong family history of bowel cancer or a genetic condition that can cause bowel cancer, ask your GP whether you need to have more regular tests and start screening at an earlier age.

## Finding bowel cancer early

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Bowel cancer can usually be treated successfully if it is found early. Most early-stage bowel cancers do not have symptoms, so it is important to take part in bowel cancer screening. Don't let embarrassment stop you from getting checked.

# Lung cancer

Every year, about 6000 women are diagnosed with lung cancer in Australia. Although rates of lung cancer are higher in men, they are coming down, while rates of lung cancer in women are going up.

## Reducing your risk

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Tobacco smoking causes about 65% of lung cancers in women, although some women who develop lung cancer have never smoked. Quitting smoking is the best way to reduce your risk of developing lung cancer. Better still, never start.

Avoid second-hand smoke – exposure to other people’s smoke (passive smoking) also increases the risk of lung cancer. Smoking low-tar and low-nicotine cigarettes does not reduce the risk of developing lung cancer.

Other risk factors include being over 60, having a family history of lung cancer, having a personal history of lung disease, or having been exposed to asbestos or silica (often in the workplace). If you are exposed to cancer-causing dusts in the workplace, use personal protective equipment to protect your lungs.

### Smoking and cancer

Smoking is the biggest preventable cause of cancer. It increases the chances of developing many types of cancer, including lung, bowel, cervical, ovarian, bladder, kidney, liver, oesophageal, pancreatic and stomach cancers.

Quitting smoking is one of the most important things you can do to reduce your risk of cancer. Quitting smoking at any age will benefit your health. For support, speak to your GP, call the Quitline on **13 7848** or visit **icanquit.com.au**.

## WHAT SHOULD I LOOK OUT FOR?



The main symptoms of lung cancer are:

- a persistent new cough (lasting longer than three weeks)
- a change in an ongoing cough
- breathlessness
- pain in the chest and/or shoulder
- coughing or spitting up blood
- fatigue (feeling tired)
- weight loss or loss of appetite.

Having one or more of these symptoms doesn't necessarily mean you have lung cancer. Whether you smoke or not, it is important to see your GP if you have any symptoms.

## Finding lung cancer early

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

If you smoke or have been exposed to asbestos or silica in the workplace, talk to your GP about your risk of lung cancer.

Although a national lung cancer screening program is not yet available in Australia, trials are looking at the best way of screening people at high risk of lung cancer – see your GP to find out if there are any trials that would be suitable for you.

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For information on how to protect yourself from cancer-causing substances in the workplace, including asbestos, silica dust and UV radiation, visit [cancer.org.au/preventing-cancer/workplace-cancer](https://cancer.org.au/preventing-cancer/workplace-cancer).

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# Cancer of the uterus

**Cancer of the uterus is also called uterine or endometrial cancer. About 3200 women are diagnosed each year in Australia.**

## Risk factors

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Cancer of the uterus is more common in women who are over 50 and have been through menopause, but rates are rising in younger women. Risk factors include being overweight or obese, having diabetes, not being physically active, taking oestrogen-only menopause hormone therapy (MHT), and taking tamoxifen for breast cancer.

Family history is important – having one or more close relatives diagnosed with uterine, ovarian or bowel cancer, or inheriting a genetic condition such as Lynch syndrome, can increase the risk.

## Reducing the risk

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Maintaining a healthy body weight and being physically active are the best ways to reduce your risk of developing cancer of the uterus. If you have other risk factors, talk to your GP to find out if there are things you can do to reduce the risk. Finding cancer of the uterus early can lead to successful treatment.

### WHAT SHOULD I LOOK OUT FOR?



Signs to look out for include:

- unusual vaginal bleeding
- a change in your periods
- any bleeding or spotting after menopause
- heavy, irregular periods after the age of 40
- a watery discharge.

These symptoms can occur for other reasons, but it is best to see your GP for a check-up.

# Ovarian cancer

**Ovarian cancer is the 10th most common cancer diagnosed in Australian women. About 1300 women are diagnosed each year.**

## Risk factors

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Any woman can develop ovarian cancer, but it is more common over the age of 50 and after menopause. Other risk factors include having endometriosis, never having children or having children late, and having fertility treatment. Some types of ovarian cancer have been linked to smoking or being overweight. A small number of women may have inherited a gene fault that increases their risk of ovarian cancer.

## Reducing the risk

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Having children before the age of 35, breastfeeding and using the combined oral contraceptive pill for several years are associated with a reduced risk of ovarian cancer. Staying a healthy weight and making healthy lifestyle choices may also help reduce the risk.

Ovarian cancer can be difficult to diagnose. There is no effective screening test for ovarian cancer. The cervical screening test does not find ovarian cancer. It is important to know your body – if you notice any of the signs below, see your GP for a check-up.

### WHAT SHOULD I LOOK OUT FOR?



Signs to look out for include:

- a swollen or bloated abdomen (belly)
- persistent pain or discomfort in the abdomen or pelvis
- loss of appetite or feeling full quickly
- changed bowel habits
- unexplained weight loss or gain
- indigestion or heartburn.

# Cervical cancer

**About 930 women are diagnosed with cervical cancer in Australia each year. Cancer of the cervix is one of the most preventable cancers.**

## Risk factors

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Almost all cases of cervical cancer are caused by infection with human papillomavirus (HPV). Smoking and long-term use of oral contraceptives increase the risk for women infected with HPV.

## Reducing your risk

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When the HPV vaccine is given in adolescence, it provides strong protection against cervical cancer. If you are under 20 and weren't vaccinated at school, talk to your doctor about having the vaccine now.

For women aged 25 and older, the best protection against cervical cancer is cervical screening (see below). Cervical cancer usually has no symptoms in its early stages. The screening test is the most effective way to find any precancerous changes or early cervical cancer, which can then be treated. The HPV vaccine does not protect against all strains of HPV, so it's important to have regular cervical screening tests whether you are vaccinated or not.

### Cervical screening test

The cervical screening test replaced the Pap test in 2017. It detects cancer-causing types of HPV in a sample of cells taken from the cervix. The National Cervical Screening Program recommends that women aged 25–74 have a cervical screening test two years after their last Pap test, and then once every five years. Some women are able to self-collect their sample – you can ask your doctor if this is an option for you. For more information, talk to your doctor or visit [cervicalscreening.org.au](http://cervicalscreening.org.au).

# Thyroid cancer

About 2700 Australian women are diagnosed with thyroid cancer each year. Women are almost three times more likely than men to develop this cancer.

## Risk factors

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The exact cause of thyroid cancer is not known, but some things are known to increase the risk. These risk factors include having had radiation therapy to the head and neck area as a child, having a strong family history of thyroid cancer, and being overweight or obese.

## Reducing your risk

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Maintaining a healthy body weight may help reduce the risk of developing thyroid cancer. If you are concerned about having a strong family history of thyroid cancer, talk to your GP. They may refer you to a genetic counsellor or a family cancer clinic to assess your risk.

Thyroid cancer usually develops slowly and without many obvious symptoms. Most thyroid cancers are found when a person is having an ultrasound for another reason. The vast majority of thyroid cancers respond well to treatment.

### WHAT SHOULD I LOOK OUT FOR?



If symptoms occur, they usually include:

- a painless lump in the neck or throat
- trouble swallowing
- difficulty breathing
- changes to the voice (e.g. hoarseness)
- swollen lymph nodes in the neck.

Most painless lumps in the neck or throat will turn out to be benign thyroid nodules (not cancer), but check any lumps or other symptoms with your GP.

## Find trustworthy information & support

Cancer Council produces free booklets, fact sheets, online information and podcasts about more than 25 types of cancer, as well as treatments, emotional and practical issues, and recovery.

If you or someone you know has been diagnosed with cancer, call **13 11 20** for information and support, or visit **cancercouncil.com.au**.



### Note to reader

Always consult your doctor about matters that affect your health. This information 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 information brochure with them.

All care is taken to ensure that this information brochure is accurate at the time of publication. Please note that information on cancer, including the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of cancer, is constantly being updated and revised 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 publication.

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