



# Breast cancer prevention and early detection information from BreastCheck

Understand how you can reduce your  
risk of breast cancer



An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta Scagthástála  
National Screening Service



National Cancer  
Control Programme



**BreastCheck**

An Clár Náisiúnta Scagthástála Giobh  
The National Breast Screening Programme

## About this leaflet

Did you know that **we could prevent around one in four breast cancer cases?**

Keep reading to see what things affect your chances of developing breast cancer, and what you can do to reduce your risk of developing this disease.

## Breast cancer and risk factors

Breast cancer is the most common cancer in women in Ireland. Around 3,500 women are diagnosed with breast cancer each year. 1 in 7 women in Ireland will develop breast cancer in their lifetime.

Many things increase your chance (risk) of getting breast cancer. We call these 'risk factors'.

Some risk factors we can't change, such as our age and our genes.

Risk factors we can change, include drinking alcohol, the types of food we eat, and how physically active we are.

Because we can't change some things, some people will still get breast cancer. This includes people with very healthy lifestyles. That said, we can all take steps to reduce our chance of serious illness by making healthy lifestyle choices, and knowing symptoms that need to be assessed.

**Again, the good news is we can all take action to reduce our risk of breast cancer.**

# What can I do to reduce my risk of breast cancer?

You can reduce your risk of breast cancer by knowing about both types of risk factors, the ones you can change and the ones you can't. Knowing about both helps you take action to remain healthy.

## Modifiable risk factors (things you can change)

### Weight

Maintaining a healthy body decreases your risk of breast cancer. If you are overweight, even modest sustained weight loss can lower your breast cancer risk.



#### What you can do:

- Try to keep keep a healthy body weight
- Eat a healthy diet
- Keep physically active
- Aim to get enough sleep
- Mind your mental health.

For tips on weight management and minding your mental health see the HSE website on [www2.hse.ie/healthy-eating-active-living/](http://www2.hse.ie/healthy-eating-active-living/) and [www.gov.ie/healthyreland](http://www.gov.ie/healthyreland)

## Alcohol

You are more at risk of cancer if you drink alcohol.

Alcohol causes 1 in 13 breast cancers diagnosed in Ireland each year. If you drink even a small amount of alcohol, there is a risk it will harm your health.

The less you drink, the better for your health.



### What you can do:

- Choose not to drink alcohol, or
- Cut down the amount of alcohol you drink.

If you do choose to drink alcohol, try to follow the HSE low-risk alcohol guidelines. This is no more than 11 standard drinks for women per week. A standard drink is one pub measure of spirits; a small glass of wine; a small glass of beer. See [askaboutalcohol.ie](http://askaboutalcohol.ie)

## Breastfeeding

Breastfeeding reduces a woman's risk of breast cancer. The longer a woman has breastfed over the course of her life, the greater the protection.



## Hormone replacement therapy (HRT)



Women may take HRT to manage symptoms caused by the menopause.

HRT may increase the risk of breast cancer.

HRT is a personal choice about what is right for you. For some women, the benefits of taking HRT may outweigh the risks.

### What you can do:

- Talk to your GP (doctor) about the risks and benefits of HRT. They can help you make an informed choice about whether this medication is right for you.

## Oral contraceptive pill

Taking the oral contraceptive pill can slightly increase your risk of breast cancer. This risk goes back to normal 10 years after you have stop taking the pill.

## Physical activity

Physical activity decreases your risk of breast cancer.  
Any amount of physical activity is good for your health.



### What you can do:

- Aim to do two and half hours of moderate physical activity spread through the week

or

- One hour and 15 minutes of vigorous physical activity spread through the week.

Moderate activity makes you a little out of breath, increases your heart rate, you can talk but not sing.

Vigorous activity makes you out of breath, increases your heart rate, you will only be able to say a few words.

See [www2.hse.ie/healthy-eating-active-living/](http://www2.hse.ie/healthy-eating-active-living/)

## Healthy eating

You can reduce your risk of developing cancer if you eat for health.



### What you can do:

- Learn more about healthy food choices
- Make changes to your diet. This can mean eating more fruit and vegetables and cutting down on processed foods
- See the Irish Nutrition and Dietetic Association [www.indi.ie](http://www.indi.ie) and SafeFood [www.safefood.net](http://www.safefood.net)

## Smoking

Tobacco products are harmful to your health. You have a better chance of staying healthy if you do not smoke.



### What you can do:

- If you do smoke, there is support to help you quit. See [www.quit.ie](http://www.quit.ie) or call 1800 201 203 for free and useful advice.

## Understanding your risk of breast cancer

### Non-modifiable risk factors

(things you can't change)

Non-modifiable risk factors are things that you cannot change. However, it is still important that you know about them, as this can help you understand your risk of breast cancer, and look out for signs and symptoms.

Important non-modifiable risk factors for breast cancer include:

### Ageing

As you age, your risk of developing breast cancer increases. About 8 in 10 women diagnosed with breast cancer in Ireland are over the age of 50.



## Family history

Your risk of breast cancer increases if you have a mother, sister or daughter who has, or had, breast cancer.



Your risk increases further if:

- you have more than one close relative who developed breast cancer
- your close relative developed breast cancer before the age of 50.

## Inherited genes

Some people have a higher risk of breast cancer because they have an inherited gene with an error in it. For example, if you have a BRCA1 or BRCA2 gene that has an error in it, you are more likely to get breast cancer.

## Dense breast tissue

Breasts have fatty tissue and non-fatty tissue. Dense breasts have more non-fatty tissue than breasts that are not dense. How 'dense' your breasts are depends on how much of this non-fatty tissue you have.

- Risk of breast cancer is higher in women with the most dense breasts compared to those with less dense breasts.
- You can't tell how dense your breasts are by looking at them or by feeling them.

A mammogram is an x-ray of the breast. The BreastCheck screening programme uses mammograms to try and detect breast cancer at a very early stage, before it has caused any signs or symptoms like a lump. Dense breast tissue appears white on a mammogram.

Cancer also appears white on a mammogram. This can make it more difficult to spot breast cancer in the mammogram of women with dense breasts.



You are more likely to have dense breasts if you:

- are under 50 years of age (It is normal for younger women to have more dense breasts)
- are pregnant or breastfeeding or
- are taking HRT.

Our genes may also affect how dense our breasts are. Density also changes over time.

Not all women with dense breasts will get breast cancer. We don't know which women with dense breasts will develop breast cancer and which won't.

We don't know how best to measure breast density, or how breast density information could best be used by doctors or women. In the future, breast density information could be used by doctors and women to better understand and monitor a woman's breast cancer risk.

We don't know exactly why breast density and breast cancer are linked. Many people around the world are working to answer this question. That is why it is important to do more research in this area.

Researchers in the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland School of Health Medicine are studying the link between breast density and cancer.

## **Reproductive and gynaecological factors**

Breast cancer risk is higher in women who:

- have had no children or fewer children
- had their first pregnancy at an older age
- had late menopause (menopause usually happens between age 45 and 55)
- had their first menstrual period at an early age - before the age of 12.

## History of breast cancer

Your breast cancer risk is higher if you have a history of breast cancer in the past.

## X-rays or radiotherapy

You may have an increased risk of breast cancer if you have received radiotherapy to the chest area in the past.

## What you can do

### Early detection

There are steps we can all take to reduce our risk of breast cancer. However, 1 in 7 women in Ireland will get breast cancer in their lifetime. If breast cancer is found early, your chances of survival are much better than if it is picked up late.

### How can I find breast cancer early?

- Check your breasts at regular intervals.
- Know the signs of breast cancer and contact your GP without delay if you develop any signs.
- Consider coming for your screening appointment when invited. Your GP (doctor) can help you make an informed decision about screening.

Let's look at these three things you can do in turn.

## 1. Check your breasts regularly

Look for changes: use a mirror so that you can see the breasts from different angles.

Feel for changes: an easy way of feeling your breast is in the bath or shower. Some women prefer to feel for changes while lying down.

### Tips for self-checking your breasts

- Check your breasts around the same time every month
- Check your breasts in front of a mirror or in the shower so you can look or feel for changes.

Look for:

- If one of your breasts has become larger or lower. Remember that it is normal for your breasts to be different sizes. You are looking for a change in size of one of your breasts.
- Puckering, dimpling or redness of the skin
- Check nipples for any changes such as redness, crusting, eczema or change in shape or direction.

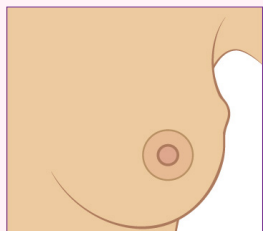
Feel for:

- Lumps
- Thickening of breast tissue
- Bumpy areas that seem different from other breast tissue.

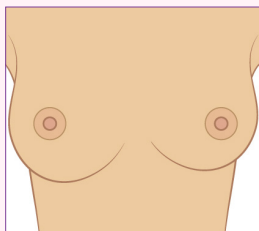
See [www2.hse.ie/wellbeing/how-to-check-your-breasts.html](http://www2.hse.ie/wellbeing/how-to-check-your-breasts.html) for more details on how to check your breasts.

## 2. Know the signs of breast cancer and contact your GP without delay if you develop any signs

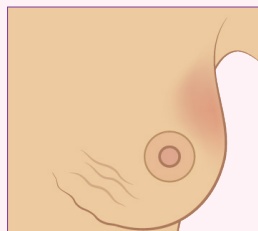
Contact your doctor **immediately** if you have any of the following signs of breast cancer, even if you have had a recent BreastCheck screening test or are due a screening test soon:



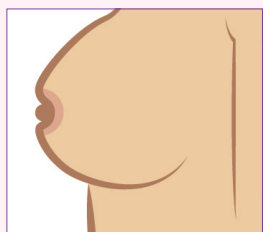
- a new lump in either of your breasts
- a new lump in either of your armpits



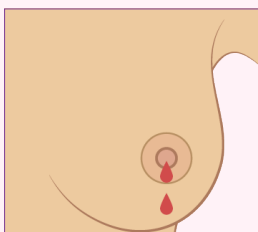
- a change in the size, shape or feel of one or both breasts or armpits, e.g. a new area of thickened tissue or lumpiness in either breast or armpit that was not there before



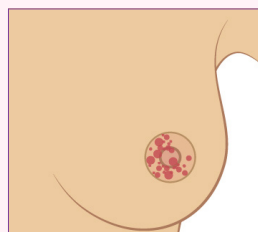
- skin changes on your breast such as puckering or dimpling (the skin may look like orange peel)
- an abscess (infected boil) in your breast – this may appear as a red, tender area on your breast



- a change in the appearance of your nipple, such as the nipple flattening or sinking into your breast or turning inwards



- bloodstained or watery discharge from either of your nipples



- a rash or eczema on or around your nipple.

### 3. Consider coming to your BreastCheck screening appointment

Breast screening helps find cancer at an early stage, before it has caused any signs or symptoms like a lump in the breast. If breast cancer is found early, it's easier to treat and there's a better chance of recovery.

Breast screening takes 30 minutes. You will have a mammogram of your breasts at a BreastCheck clinic, or mobile screening unit. A mammogram is an x-ray of the breast that can help find breast cancer when it is too small to see or feel.

You'll get a letter with your breast screening results within three weeks after your mammogram. The results will also be sent to your GP.

Most results are normal and no cancer is found. Breast screening does not find signs of all breast cancer. But screening helps find cancer early, when it can be easier to treat.

Screening is not the same as diagnosis. If your screening test suggests that you may have breast cancer, you will be offered further tests to find out if you do have breast cancer or not. See [www.breastcheck.ie](http://www.breastcheck.ie) for more information on screening, including the things screening can and can't do, and what happens at your screening test.

**Did you know - you can get breast cancer at any time, including between screening appointments and when you are outside the age range for screening (above the age of 69 or below the age of 50 for BreastCheck). This is why it is very important to be 'breast aware' and check your breasts regularly for changes. Know the signs of breast cancer and contact your GP without delay if you develop any of these signs.**

**Remember, we can all take steps to reduce our cancer risk by making healthy lifestyle choices. We can also take steps to find cancer early by**

- 1. Being 'breast aware' and checking our breasts regularly, and**
- 2. Knowing the signs of breast cancer and contacting our GP without delay if we develop any signs**
- 3. Consider attending for BreastCheck screening when invited.**

## BreastCheck contact details

### Central Office

King's Inns House,  
200 Parnell Street, Dublin 1  
Tel: 01 865 9300  
Freephone: 1800 45 45 55  
Email: [info@breastcheck.ie](mailto:info@breastcheck.ie)

### Eccles Unit

36 Eccles Street, Dublin 7  
Tel: 01 882 6200  
Email: [eccles@breastcheck.ie](mailto:eccles@breastcheck.ie)

### Merrion Unit

Merrion Road, Dublin 4  
Tel: 01 223 5800  
Email: [merrion@breastcheck.ie](mailto:merrion@breastcheck.ie)

### Southern Unit

Infirmery Road, Cork  
Tel: 021 464 9700  
Email: [southern@breastcheck.ie](mailto:southern@breastcheck.ie)

### Western Unit

Newcastle Road, Galway  
Tel: 091 580 600  
Email: [western@breastcheck.ie](mailto:western@breastcheck.ie)

### More information

For more information, to register or to check if you are on the register, visit [www.breastcheck.ie](http://www.breastcheck.ie) or Freephone 1800 45 45 55.

Email: [info@breastcheck.ie](mailto:info@breastcheck.ie) Freephone: 1800 45 45 55



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