Breast Cancer
What you should know
What is breast cancer?

Breast cancer is when the normal cells in your breast grow in an abnormal way to form a mass of cells called a tumour.

Your breasts are made up of different types of tissue including fat, connective tissue and gland tissue. The gland tissue is divided into milk lobes and milk ducts. The lobes make and store breast milk after pregnancy and the ducts carry milk to the nipple.

Your breasts are rarely the same size as each other. They may feel different at different times of the menstrual cycle, sometimes becoming lumpy just before your period.
What increases my risk of breast cancer?

**Age**
Being a woman over the age of 50.

**Family history**
Breast cancer and/or ovarian cancer in several close members of your family. Breast cancer in a close relative when they were under the age of 50.

**Hormones**
Starting periods before the age of 12 or having menopause after the age of 55. Also, prolonged use of hormone replacement therapy (HRT).

**The Pill**
The contraceptive pill causes a small increase in risk. This risk gradually returns to normal after you stop taking the pill.

**Having no children**
Having no children or having your first child later in life slightly increases your risk.

**Previous breast disease**
Being diagnosed before with breast cancer or atypical ductal hyperplasia (ADH).

**Radiotherapy**
Having had radiotherapy to your chest area in the past.

**Lifestyle**
An unhealthy lifestyle such as being overweight, not being active, drinking alcohol or smoking.

Risk factors increase your chance of getting breast cancer. Having a risk factor doesn’t mean you will get breast cancer. Sometimes people with no risk factors may get the disease.
What are the symptoms of breast cancer?

- A change in the size or shape of one breast
- A change in the skin, like puckering, dimpling (like orange peel) or redness
- A change in the nipple shape or direction, like a pulled-in or flattened nipple
- An unusual discharge (liquid) from one or both of your nipples
- A change on or around the nipple, such as a rash or flaky or crusted skin
- Swelling in your armpit or around your collarbone
- A lump, any size, or thickening in your breast
- Constant pain in one part of your breast or armpit.

These symptoms can be caused by other things, but always get them checked out.
What should I do if I have any symptoms?

If you have any symptoms or changes in your body that you are worried about, it’s important to have them checked by your GP (family doctor). The chances are it will not be cancer. Getting your symptoms checked is not wasting anyone’s time. The sooner cancer is spotted, the more likely you are to recover from it.

How is breast cancer diagnosed?

If your doctor thinks your symptoms need to be investigated, you will have more tests. Tests that can help to diagnose breast cancer include:

- **Mammogram**
  An x-ray of your breasts.

- **Ultrasound scan**
  A scan using sound waves to see if there are lumps in your breast.

- **Biopsy**
  A specialist takes tissue samples from your breast and examines them under a microscope.

If you are diagnosed with breast cancer our booklet has more information.
How can I reduce my risk of breast cancer?

**Be a healthy weight:** Being a healthy weight is one of the best ways to protect yourself from cancer. This is because fat cells in your body make hormones. High levels of certain hormones increase your cancer risk.

**Be active:** Women who are physically active have a lower risk of breast cancer than less active women. Try to do at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity on five or more days a week.

**Limit alcohol:** Drinking alcohol increases your risk of breast cancer. The more you cut down on alcohol, the more you can reduce your risk of breast cancer.

**Don’t smoke:** Some recent research suggests that smoking may specifically increase the risk of breast cancer. Smoking causes 30 per cent of all cancers.

**Breastfeed your baby:** Breastfeeding helps to protect mothers from breast cancer. The longer a woman breastfeeds her baby, the more she reduces her breast cancer risk.

**Check your breasts regularly:** You are more likely to survive cancer if you spot it at an early stage. Learn what feels normal for you and check your breasts every month. Talk to your doctor if you notice anything unusual.

See the end of this leaflet for tips on how to reduce your risk of cancer in general.
How can I check myself?

1. Get to know what’s normal for you – how your breasts look and feel

2. Know what to look out for, like lumps or other changes to the look and feel of your breast or nipple. See the list in this leaflet

3. Look for changes in the mirror and feel for changes, too. When you are in the shower, when putting on moisturiser or when lying down

4. Check all parts of your breast, your armpits and up to your collar bone

5. Discuss any changes with your family doctor – without delay

Can I be screened for breast cancer?

Testing for breast cancer when you have no symptoms is called screening.

BreastCheck is the national breast screening programme. All women aged 50 to 64 are invited to have a free mammogram every 2 years. For more information see www.breastcheck.ie
12 ways to reduce your cancer risk

- Do not smoke
- Avoid second-hand smoke
- Be a healthy weight
- Be physically active in everyday life
- Have a healthy diet
- Avoid alcohol
- Avoid too much sun
- Avoid pollutants
- Get screened for cancer
- Breastfeed your baby / Limit HRT
- Get vaccinations - Hepatitis B for babies / HPV for girls
- Find out if you are exposed to radon gas in your area

Based on the European Code Against Cancer
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1 in 10 women in Ireland will get breast cancer at some point in their lives.

Better treatments mean that more women are being cured or living with breast cancer.

Men can also get breast cancer, but it is very rare.

Breast cancer is most common in women over 50.

**How common is breast cancer?**

Breast cancer is the most common cancer in women in Ireland, after skin cancer. Around 2,900 women and 30 men are diagnosed with it each year.
For more information…

If you are worried or have questions about breast cancer or any cancer…

Call our Cancer Nurseline
Freephone 1800 200 700
or email cancernurseline@irishcancer.ie
for confidential advice, support and information.

Visit our Daffodil Centres where our nurses can give you advice about healthy lifestyles and reducing your risk of cancer. To find out where your local Daffodil Centre is, email daffodilcentreinfo@irishcancer.ie

Visit our website www.cancer.ie for more information on breast cancer and ways to reduce your risk of cancer.

Want to stop smoking?

Quitting smoking is one of the best things you can do to reduce your risk of cancer.

If you would like advice or support on quitting, call the HSE Quit Team on CallSave 1800 201 203, Freetext QUIT to 50100 or visit www.quit.ie