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### Preventing Breast Cancer

**This fact sheet is based largely on the most recent information provided by the world famous Mayo Clinic in America.**

Preventing breast cancer: Lifestyle choices and other factors you can control

If you're like most women hoping to avoid breast cancer, you're looking for something you can do — some changes you can make in your life — that will steer you away from the disease.

Some things you can't avoid when it comes to breast cancer risk, such as your age, genetic makeup and environmental exposures. But other breast cancer risk factors are well within your control. Employing preventive health measures can't guarantee that you won't develop breast cancer, but it's a step in the right direction.

#### **Diet and exercise prevention strategies**

Among the easiest things to control are what you eat and drink and how active you are. Here are some strategies that may help you decrease your risk of breast cancer:

**Limit alcohol.** A strong link exists between alcohol consumption and breast cancer. The type of alcohol consumed — wine, beer or mixed drinks — seems to make no difference. To help protect against breast cancer, limit alcohol to less than one drink a day or avoid alcohol completely. Some studies indicate that folic acid — a nutrient found in citrus juices and green, leafy vegetables — might help reduce the risk of breast cancer in women who consume moderate amounts of alcohol.

**Maintain a healthy weight.** There's a clear link between obesity — weighing more than is appropriate for your age and height — and breast cancer. This is

especially true if you gain the weight later in life, particularly after menopause. Excess fatty tissue is a source of circulating estrogen in your body. And breast cancer risk is linked to how much estrogen you're exposed to during your lifetime.

**Stay physically active.** Regular exercise can help you maintain a healthy weight and, as a consequence, may aid in lowering your risk of breast cancer. Aim for at least 30 minutes of exercise on most days of the week. If you haven't been particularly active in the past, start your exercise program slowly and gradually work up to a greater intensity. Try to include weight-bearing exercises such as walking, jogging or aerobics. These have the added benefit of keeping your bones strong.

**Limit fat in your diet.** Several studies have reported a link between high dietary fat intake and breast cancer risk. Reducing the amount of fat in your diet decreases your risk of some other cancers as well as the risks of diabetes, cardiovascular disease and stroke. And it helps you maintain a healthy weight, which also reduces your risk of breast cancer. It's a good idea to limit your fat intake to less than 35 percent of your daily calories. And keep an eye on the amount of saturated fat you consume. Evidence links increased amounts of saturated fat in a diet to breast cancer.

Aspirin therapy and hormone therapy: Consult your doctor

Talk with your doctor about your individual health risks before trying daily aspirin therapy or deciding on long-term hormone therapy.

Ask about aspirin. Taking an aspirin just once a week may help protect against breast cancer. A study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in May 2004 found that women who had a history of breast cancer and who took aspirin once a week for six months or longer were 20 percent less likely to develop breast cancer than women who didn't take the drug. Women who took a daily aspirin had an even greater reduction in risk — 28 percent.

Aspirin and ibuprofen are effective only against breast cancers that have receptors for the female hormones estrogen and progesterone, which are known to stimulate tumour growth. The drugs work by reducing estrogen levels in your body and breast tissue. They do this by blocking a hormone-like substance (prostaglandin) that's needed to activate an enzyme important in the synthesis of estrogen.

However, be sure to talk to your doctor before you start taking aspirin as a preventive measure. When used for long periods of time, aspirin can cause serious side effects, including stomach irritation, bleeding and ulcers; bleeding in the intestinal and urinary tracts; and hemorrhagic stroke. In general, you're not a candidate for aspirin therapy if you have a history of peptic ulcers, liver or kidney disease, bleeding disorders or gastrointestinal bleeding, or a history of any inflammatory bowel disease. The non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs are just the same and don't forget that asthmatics should in principle avoid aspirin and NSAIDs as they can trigger attacks.

In principle I would advise against HRT unless there is serious medical indication that it's necessary. Study results from the Women's Health Initiative (WHI) raised concerns about the use of hormone therapy for symptoms of menopause. Among other problems, long-term treatment with estrogen-progestin combinations increased the risk of breast cancer. The WHI investigators also reported that women taking hormone therapy while in the study who developed breast cancer had more aggressive and larger tumours. The women in the study taking hormone therapy were also found to have more abnormal mammograms — requiring additional imaging methods, such as ultrasound — due to the hormones' effects on breast tissue density.

If you are already using HRT, discuss it with your doctor. There are many natural alternatives that help, especially adding soya-based foods to your diet like tofu, soya milk, cheese and yoghurt, as well as soya beans. Eat plenty of all the nuts and seeds making sure that you include flax seeds and flax seed oil as these are particularly rich in the plant chemicals which have a protective

hormone-like action on the body. There are also excellent natural supplements containing extracts of soya or red clover and herbal preparations like black cohosh and sage which all help alleviate the menopausal symptoms.

### **Pesticides and antibiotics: Be cautious**

Both pesticides and antibiotics have been linked to increased breast cancer risk.

Avoid exposure to pesticides. The molecular structure of some pesticides closely resembles that of estrogen. This means they may attach to receptor sites in your body. Although studies haven't found a definite link between most pesticides and breast cancer, researchers have learned that women with elevated levels of pesticides in their breast tissue have a greater breast cancer risk.

Avoid unnecessary antibiotics. Scientists recently found a link between antibiotic use and breast cancer — the longer antibiotics were used, the greater the risk of breast cancer. Researchers caution, however, that other factors, such as underlying illness or a weakened immune system, rather than antibiotics themselves, may account for the elevated cancer risk.

Two exciting areas of new research are looking at the importance of a group of natural chemicals in vitamin A called retinoids and flaxseed. Vitamin A seems to inhibit the growth of cancer cells and be an effective protector against breast cancers which are not hormone linked. As you've already read, the naturally-occurring phytoestrogens in flax seed is likely to be a specific substance that prevents the growth of breast cancers due to their high content of lignans.

Lycopene and the mineral selenium are also extremely important and tend to be consumed in small amounts in the average British diet. Lycopene is a natural carotenoid and the richest source is ripe tomatoes. It's much more concentrated in tomato products like sauce, puree and canned tomatoes than

in the artificially ripened supermarket variety. Selenium consumption has declined dramatically in recent years since we switched from North American or Canadian bread flour to European flours which contain far less of this vital mineral which is known to protect against breast cancer. Brazil nuts are a valuable source and two or three a day could double your intake. Interestingly both lycopene and selenium also protect men against prostate cancer.

It's even more important for women with a family history of breast cancer, or who have already had it themselves to follow the advice in this fact sheet. Anyone currently having radiotherapy or waiting for the treatment to begin should start taking the Swiss herbal tonic BioStrath Elixir straight away as there have been excellent studies to show that it dramatically reduces the side effects of radiotherapy.

Of course, there are no guarantees that you will avoid cancer for the rest of your life. A first step in protecting yourself from breast cancer is to do regular examinations. These are best done in the shower or bath with a wet soapy hand which makes it easier to feel any changes. If your nipples become inverted or discharge at all, or if you feel any kind of lump that is not usually there, see your doctor immediately.

One valuable check is to lean forward in front of a mirror so that your breasts hang down and look for any wrinkling of the breast skin as this could also be the sign of some underlying change.

A healthy lifestyle and diet which includes lots of fruit, vegetables and salads, wholegrain cereals, three portions of oily fish a week, plenty of nuts, seeds and beans, modest amounts of meat, poultry and dairy products, and no more than 2 glasses of wine a day will all dramatically reduce your risk of breast cancer, many other cancers, as well as strokes and heart disease.