

October is National Breast Cancer Awareness Month, a perfect time to take steps to help lower your risk of developing breast cancer. About 1 in 8 women will develop breast cancer at some point during her life. While you can't change some risk factors—genetics and aging, for example—there are things you can do that may lower your breast cancer risk. Here are 4 ways to help protect your breast health.

1. **Watch your weight.** Being overweight or obese increases breast cancer risk. This is especially true after menopause and for women who gain weight as adults. The major source of estrogen for postmenopausal women is not the ovaries, but fat tissue. The increased risk may be due in part to more estrogen being made in fatty tissue.

If you're already at a healthy weight, stay there. If you're carrying extra pounds, try to shed some. There's evidence that losing weight may lower breast cancer risk. One easy goal to get started is to try losing 5% to 10% of your current weight over 6 months. For most women, that means dropping just half a pound per week.

2. **Exercise regularly.** Many studies have found that exercise is a breast-healthy habit. As little as 75 to 150 minutes of brisk walking each week has been shown to lower risk. Ramping up your exercise routine even more may lower your breast cancer risk even further.

The American Cancer Society recommends getting at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity activity or 75 minutes of vigorous activity each week. (Or a combination of both.) And don't cram it all into a single workout – spread it out over the week.

3. **Limit alcohol.** Women who have 2 or more alcoholic drinks a day have about 1½ times the risk of breast cancer compared to women who don't drink at all. Follow the American Cancer Society's recommendation of no more than 1 drink per day for women and 2 drinks per day for men. A single drink amounts to 12 ounces of beer, 5 ounces of wine or 1½ ounces of 80-proof distilled spirits (hard liquor).

4. **Avoid or limit menopausal hormone therapy.** Taking hormones such as estrogen and progesterone had long been used for night sweats, hot flashes, and other troublesome symptoms of menopause. But in 2002, researchers found that postmenopausal women who took a combination of estrogen and progestin were more likely to develop breast cancer. Breast cancer risk appears to return to normal within 5 years after stopping the combination of hormones.

Talk with your doctor about all the options to control your menopause symptoms, and the risks and benefits of each. If you do decide to try HRT, it is best to use it at the lowest dose that works for you and for as short a time as possible.