

Can Men Get Breast Cancer?: The Facts

Breast cancer is always thought of as a woman's disease, and this is essentially correct. However, it is important to note that breast cancer is a condition that develops in a part of the body that exists in men as well as women. The rates of breast cancer are miniscule in men – perhaps 1% of all breast cancers – only because men have very small amounts of breast tissue in comparison to women. Nevertheless, cancer can and does develop wherever this tissue is present, which is why men can and do get this disease.

Male Risk Factors

Up until puberty, boys and girls both have small numbers of breast ducts and some fatty breast tissue beneath the nipple and the areola. Once the ovaries start producing estrogen and other female hormones, female breast development takes off, while the breast areas in boys do not change much as adolescents make the transition into adulthood. But what boys have is not lost, and that leaves men at risk of developing breast cancer over the course of their lifetimes.

There are certain risk factors that make some men more susceptible to this relatively rare form of male cancer than others. Because most studies of this disease up until now have focused on women, it is possible that this list will have to be expanded in the future - but for now the known breast cancer risk factors for men include:

- Age – the average age of male breast cancer victims is 68
- Family history
- Heavy alcohol consumption
- Liver disease
- Previous radiation exposure in the chest area
- Klinefelter Syndrome – a congenital disorder that causes abnormal male reproductive development
- Testicular disease
- Inherited mutations of the BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes
- Estrogen treatment for prostate cancer (this female hormone feeds some types of breast cancers)
- Occupational factors – men who work in heated environments like steel mills, and those who work where there are heavy gasoline fumes have been found to have higher risk, for reasons that are not yet entirely clear

Types of Male Breast Cancer

The following are the five different types of male breast cancers that strike men, all of which also occur in women.

Ductal carcinoma in situ (DCIS) is a breast cancer that forms in the cells of breast ducts.

This cancer does not break through breast duct walls or metastasize to other areas of the body, and it is usually highly curable through the use of surgery. This form of breast cancer accounts for about 10% of all the cases that are diagnosed in men.

Infiltrating ductal carcinoma (IDC) starts in the breast ducts, but this aggressive type of cancer soon penetrates through the walls of the ducts and moves into the nearby fatty tissues of the breast. From there, this cancer can metastasize into other regions of the body. About 80% of all male breast cancers are IDCs, and if not treated promptly this type of cancer can eventually lead to the death of the patient.

Infiltrating lobular carcinoma (ILC) starts in the lobules that form at the end of breast ducts. Because these lobules are involved in the creation of breast milk, they are obviously much more plentiful in women than in men. But men do have small numbers of these lobules, and cancers that can ultimately metastasize and spread are capable of forming in this area in either sex. Only about 2% of all breast cancers in males are of this type.

Considered to be either a type of breast cancer in itself, or a precursor to the development of actual breast cancer is Lobular carcinoma *in situ* (or LCIS), depending on which medical expert is asked to define it. Just as in ILCs, abnormal cells initially form in the breast lobules. But in this instance these cells do not spread to surrounding fatty tissue or into other areas in the body, which is why there is some disagreement whether this should even be referred to as a cancer.

Paget disease of the nipple forms in the breast ducts just like IDC. When it spreads, however, it moves into the nipple and the areola instead of into the fatty tissue. This will cause the skin in these areas to become itchy, crusty, and red, and there may be oozing, bleeding, and burning in addition to the pain. There is also likely to be a lump beneath the affected area, which can usually be detected by touch. This type of breast cancer accounts for only about 1% of cases in women, but it is more common than that in men.

Diagnosing Breast Cancer in Men

Because men do not expect to get breast cancer, it can be easy for them to overlook the symptoms. Pain, redness, discomfort, and lumps that are detectable to the touch are signs of trouble, and any man who is manifesting these characteristic signs of breast cancer should make an appointment with their doctor, who may advise a biopsy be taken to find out what is going on. Men of course are not going to be having preventative mammograms, so early detection through this method is not going to be an option – unless men who know they are in high risk categories decide to have this procedure done proactively. Early detection is still possible for all men, however, if they are aware that a risk actually exists and know what signs to look for.

One piece of good news is that the most common type of breast disorder in men, which is called gynecomastia, will manifest as a lump in the breast just like breast cancer. So if

and when a man does find an anomalous lump in his breast, it is far more likely to be gynecomastia than breast cancer. Nevertheless, since men can and do contract breast cancer, it is best to take no chances, and to see a medical professional immediately if an abnormal formation is found or other troubling symptoms should occur.