

# Understanding breast cancer in men

## Can men really get breast cancer?

It may come as a surprise to know that men can develop breast cancer. While breast cancer is uncommon in men, it's important for men who find a change in their breasts not to let embarrassment or uncertainty prevent them from seeing their doctor without delay. Early detection and treatment are the best way to survive the disease.

## About breast cancer in men

In 2012, there were 116 men diagnosed with breast cancer in Australia.<sup>1</sup> Around 90% of men are diagnosed with breast cancer after the age of 50.<sup>1</sup>

Although breast cancer in men accounts for less than 1% of all breast cancers, it's just as important for men as for women to see your doctor without delay if you find a breast change.<sup>1</sup>

*I had quite a few men say to me 'that's a woman's disease' and I had to say 'no it's not, you could get it too.'*

## What is breast cancer in men?

Breast cancer in men is the same disease as that which affects women. Both men and women have breast tissue, although men have less breast tissue than women. Most of the breast tissue in men is located behind the nipple.

Male breast cancer can be early or advanced at diagnosis. Early breast cancer is cancer that is contained in the breast and may or may not have spread to the lymph nodes in the breast or armpit.

The most common breast cancer found in men is invasive ductal carcinoma. This cancer typically presents as a lump. However there are other symptoms that men should be aware of.

## Signs and symptoms of breast cancer in men

The most common symptom of breast cancer in men is a painless lump in the breast close to the nipple. Other possible symptoms include:

- ▶ a discharge from the nipple
- ▶ a change in the shape or appearance of the nipple or pectorals
- ▶ a change in the shape or appearance of the breast, such as swelling or dimpling
- ▶ pain
- ▶ swollen lymph nodes (glands) under the arm.

Not all changes are due to cancer, but it is important to see a doctor as soon as possible if you notice any new or unusual breast changes. If the changes are due to cancer, finding it early will mean a better chance of effective treatment.

## What causes breast cancer in men?

It is not possible to say exactly what causes breast cancer in men. However, research has shown that there are some things that increase a man's chance of developing breast cancer. These are called 'risk factors'.

**The most common risk factors are:**

- ▶ getting older - breast cancer in men occurs more commonly in those aged 50 years and older
- ▶ having a **strong** family history - having a family history of female or male breast cancer or ovarian cancer on either side of the family can increase your risk of developing breast cancer.

However, most men who develop breast cancer do not have a strong family history of the disease. If you are concerned about your risk based on family history see your GP.

**Other less common factors that may increase risk include:**

- ▶ high oestrogen levels
- ▶ Klinefelter's syndrome
- ▶ some testicular disorders
- ▶ radiation exposure.

## What can lower my risk?

Healthy lifestyle habits, such as not smoking, maintaining a healthy weight, being active, eating a balanced and nutritious diet, limiting your alcohol consumption, and being sun smart can help to reduce your risk for a number of cancers. Visit [www.lifestylrisk.canceraustralia.gov.au](http://www.lifestylrisk.canceraustralia.gov.au) for more information.

## What can I do?

Survival from breast cancer has dramatically improved over the past 20 years. Finding breast cancer early, before it has spread to other parts of the body, remains the key to surviving the disease. Getting to know your body and reporting new changes to your doctor can help you find breast cancer early.

## If I find a change, what happens next?

The tests used to investigate breast changes in men are the same as those used for women. It is recommended that doctors use the approach called the 'triple test' to find the cause of a breast change. However not all men will need all of these tests.

**Cancer is not a death sentence. The trick with cancer is to find it early.**

The triple test includes:

- ▶ clinical breast examination and taking a personal history
- ▶ imaging tests i.e. mammography and/or ultrasound
- ▶ non-surgical biopsy i.e. a fine needle aspiration and/or core biopsy.

A clinical breast examination involves checking both breasts and feeling the lymph nodes under the armpits. Imaging tests involve an X-ray of the breast, called a mammogram, or a scan that uses sound waves to produce an image of the breast, called an ultrasound.

If the imaging test shows an abnormal area, you may have a biopsy. This involves taking a sample of cells or tissue from the breast and examining them under a microscope.

## What if it is cancer?

Breast cancer in men can be treated successfully. The majority of men diagnosed and treated for early breast cancer will not die from the disease.

The prognosis for men with breast cancer is similar to that for women at the same age and stage of the cancer. The stage of the cancer describes the size of the tumour and extent of spread.

For men diagnosed with breast cancer, referral to a family cancer clinic for genetic assessment should be considered, particularly if there is Jewish ancestry, a family history of breast or ovarian cancer or if the family history is unknown.

*When I first got told I had cancer, I was glad I had my wife there, because I got a mental block and couldn't remember anything the doctor said.*

## Treatment options

Treatment for men with breast cancer is similar to treatment for women, and will usually include surgery and may include radiotherapy, chemotherapy or hormonal therapy.

### References

1. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2016. Australian Cancer Incidence and Mortality (ACIM) Books: Breast cancer (ICD10 code C50). [www.aihw.gov.au/cancer/data/acim\\_books](http://www.aihw.gov.au/cancer/data/acim_books) [Accessed October 2016].

For more information about treatment, including your healthcare team, types of treatment and questions you may like to ask, visit [canceraustralia.gov.au/men](http://canceraustralia.gov.au/men).

## Living with breast cancer

The diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer causes changes in your life, and can change how you think and feel about things. These changes and their effects will not be the same for all men.

It's not always easy, but over time, most men do adjust to changes caused by their experience with breast cancer and find they are able to return to doing the things that are important to them.

Sharing your thoughts and feelings with others, even painful feelings, can help you cope with your diagnosis. You might find it helpful to talk with one or more of the following: your specialist; breast care nurse; GP; psychiatrist; psychologist; counsellor; or other men who have had breast cancer.

*I had a total loss of interest in anything, it really knocked me for six, I felt so lethargic and I didn't feel like eating, I had to push myself to carry on as normal as possible.*

## How do I tell my family and friends?

Breast cancer is often seen as a 'woman's cancer', so some men find it difficult or embarrassing talking about their diagnosis. Your breast cancer diagnosis and treatment will affect others in your life, such as your partner, your family and close friends. They may experience a range of emotions, including shock, fear and anxiety, or may not know what to say. To help you and them cope with your breast cancer, good communication between yourself and others is important.

## Where can I find help and support?

There are many avenues to seek help and advice when you are facing a diagnosis of breast cancer. You don't need to go through it alone. It's important to know that many others have been there before you, and that there is help available.

Breast Cancer Network Australia's website contains personal stories from men about how breast cancer has affected their lives. Visit [www.bcna.org.au/understanding-breast-cancer/breast-cancer-in-men](http://www.bcna.org.au/understanding-breast-cancer/breast-cancer-in-men) for more information.

Cancer Council Helpline can provide up-to-date, local information about services available in your area. Call **13 11 20** from anywhere in Australia.

