breast cancer now

Raise your pulse, reduce your risk

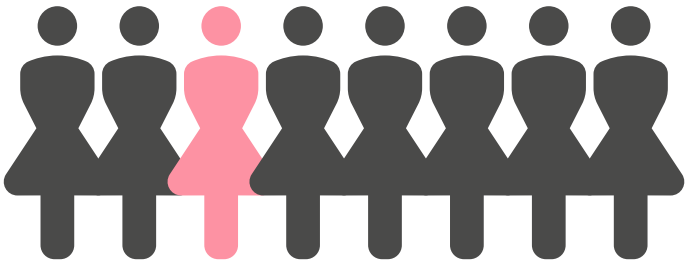
How regular physical activity can reduce your breast cancer risk

Quick facts

- 30 minutes of daily physical activity can reduce your risk of breast cancer by at least 20%
- Any moderate activity counts (this makes you warmer and breathe harder and makes your heart beat faster)

How likely am I to get breast cancer?

Breast cancer is the most common cancer in the UK. Overall, one in eight women develops the disease in their lifetime, but not everyone's risk is the same.



Some people will have a higher or lower risk than others. Our chances of developing breast cancer depend upon a combination of our genes and bodies, lifestyle and life choices and surrounding environment. There are some things that increase your risk that you cannot change, such as getting older. However there are other factors you can change to reduce your risk if you wish, such as being regularly physically active.

How much can I reduce my risk by being physically active?

After reviewing the best scientific evidence and consulting with experts, Breast Cancer Now estimates that women can reduce their risk of developing breast cancer by at least 20% by being regularly physically active.

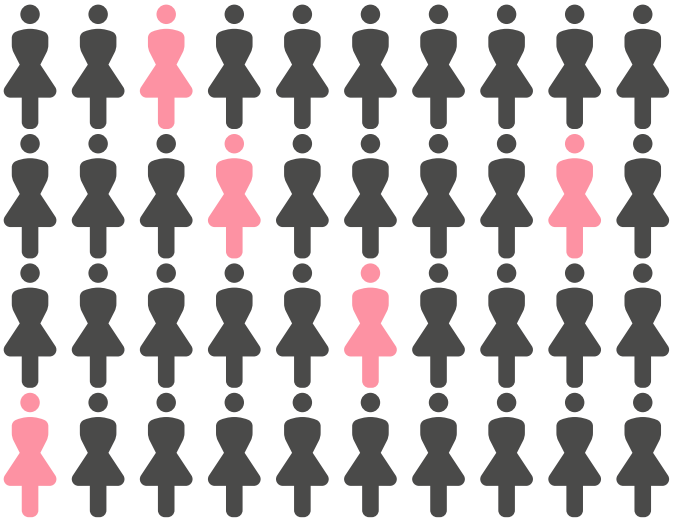
Or to put it another way, a comprehensive study identified during our review suggests that if every woman in the UK was regularly physically active, 1 in 6 cases of breast cancer could be avoided each year.

To help explain the reduction in risk, let's think about two groups of women (see diagram on the right).

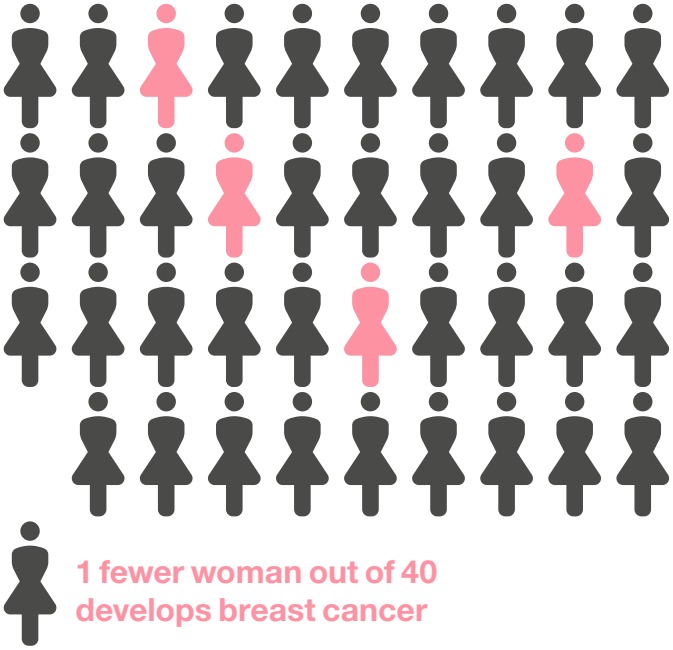
Being physically active means that four rather than five women out of 40 will develop breast cancer. That's equivalent to a 20% reduction in risk.

Regular physical activity can also help prevent and manage many other conditions, including heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, other types of cancer, obesity, mental health conditions and musculoskeletal conditions.

The first group of 40 women are not physically active. Over the course of their lives, about 5 of them will develop breast cancer.[1]



The second group of 40 women are regularly physically active throughout their lives. About 4 of them will develop breast cancer.



1 fewer woman out of 40 develops breast cancer

1 Based on women living to age 90.

What type of physical activity counts?

Any physical activity that is moderate intensity or higher will reduce your risk, provided you are active for at least 30 minutes a day. Moderate physical activity should make you warmer and breathe harder and make your heart beat faster, but you should still be able to carry on a conversation. You can do more intense physical activity if you wish. Physical activity doesn't have to be a gym session or going for a run (although they are options). There are so many activities to choose from, most of which are free to do. Here are some ideas:

10 individual activities

- Brisk walk in the park
- Join a running club
- Go for a bike ride
- Go for a swim
- Do an exercise video
- A quick gym session
- Try a new exercise class
- Try power yoga[2]
- Try a park boot camp
- Give Zumba a go

10 group or family activities

- Have a dance contest with the kids
- Play tennis or badminton with friends
- Play a round of golf
- Take family and friends tenpin bowling
- Learn a new type of dance
- Actively play with kids
- Go on a group hike
- Take the family ice-skating
- Get the family out biking
- Play football in the garden

10 day-to-day activities

- Brisk walk to work or the shops
- Push a baby buggy, pram or wheelchair
- Mow the lawn
- Do some gardening
- Wash (and wax) the car
- Get vacuuming
- Paint and decorate a room
- Clear away leaves or sweep the paths
- Walk up the stairs
- Take the dog for a walk

How much physical activity is needed?

To reduce your risk of breast cancer, you need to be physically active on a regular basis. That means exercising for a total of at least 30 minutes a day, or a total of 3.5 hours a week. To keep your risk of breast cancer down, you'll need to keep active throughout your life. Breast Cancer Now suggests you incorporate physical activity into your day-to-day routine, so it's a change for good.

How does physical activity reduce breast cancer risk?

We don't yet know for sure how physical activity reduces breast cancer risk. We do know that maintaining a healthy weight helps to reduce risk, so physical activity may reduce breast cancer risk by helping us to keep our weight healthy. Some studies have shown that physical activity may reduce levels of oestrogen in the body – a hormone which is known to encourage the growth of some breast cancers. Other studies have shown that physical activity might help our bodies respond well to insulin, which may also influence the growth of breast cancers.

What if I can't be physically active?

If you have limitations on the physical activity that you can perform due to a health condition, we recommend that you speak with your doctor about what it would be safe for you to do. They may also be able to help you work towards being more active in the future. There are other steps you can take to reduce your risk too (see next page). For specialist advice on physical activity for those with a disability, see NHS Choices (www.nhs.uk).

2 Power yoga and dynamic yoga are moderate physical activity and count towards your weekly total. However, Hatha and Pranayama yoga are only light physical activity, and so would not count.

I've had breast cancer. Can being physically active help me too?

If you have breast cancer or have had breast cancer in the past, regular physical activity may be of benefit to you.

Research suggests that regular physical activity can improve your chances of survival following a breast cancer diagnosis. There is also some evidence that physical activity may reduce the risk of the breast cancer coming back, but we don't know for sure yet whether this is the case.

Keeping active may also help you to cope with your cancer treatment and improve your quality of life, general health and mental wellbeing, both during and after treatment.

There is not enough evidence from studies to tell us precisely how much physical activity is needed, so Breast Cancer Now suggests that women aim for 3.5 hours of physical activity a week, checking first with your treatment team what is appropriate for you.

What more can I do?

There are other steps you can take to reduce your risk, such as maintaining a healthy weight and reducing the amount of alcohol you regularly drink.

For more ways to reduce your risk see breastcancernow.org or call Freephone 0333 20 70 300

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About Breast Cancer Now

We're Breast Cancer Now, the UK's largest breast cancer charity – and we're dedicated to funding research into this devastating disease. We're determined to stop women dying of breast cancer by 2050. But we'll only reach that point by working in a new, more open and collaborative way. We're bringing together all those affected by the disease to fund research, share knowledge and find answers. To improve the way we prevent, detect, treat and stop the disease. So we can move from a time when people still fear breast cancer to a generation where everybody lives. Join us at breastcancernow.org

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We welcome feedback. Please email comments to info@breastcancernow.org or call 0333 20 70 300.

This leaflet is based on up-to-date research evidence and aims to give the best information available. All information was reviewed by appropriate experts and members of the public. We advise readers with concerns about breast cancer to discuss them with a health professional.

If you would like more information about the sources of evidence on which this publication is based, please contact info@breastcancernow.org or call 0333 20 70 300.

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