



Breast cancer risk reduction

A recent report by Carlo La Vecchia, head of the department of epidemiology at the University of Milan, indicated that if women were to eat less and exercise more, their risk of developing breast cancer could be reduced by as much as 30%. Their findings, which are in general agreement with multiple other similar studies, indicate that regular vigorous exercise and maintenance of normal weight are associated with a significant reduction in the risk of developing breast cancer. This is a very important finding and deserves the attention it is receiving. It is common for both physicians and patients to blame cancer diagnoses on unavoidable influences such as family history or some yet to be identified environmental factor such as DDT or radio waves.

Thinking of breast cancer as a disease process that may be influenced by our behavior is a positive way of dealing with the issue. Since being a woman is the single biggest risk factor for developing breast cancer, and the average life-time risk for a woman to be diagnosed with breast cancer is one in eight, all women should be aware of the things that they can do to lower their own risk. The data seem very convincing--maintaining a normal weight and exercising regularly not only provide protection against heart disease, but also reduce your risk of getting breast cancer.

Other risk reduction factors:

- **Limit alcohol.** A link exists between alcohol consumption and the risk of developing breast cancer. It has been estimated that women who average more than 3 ounces of any type of alcohol per week (wine, beer, mixed drinks) may increase their risk for developing breast cancer by more than 10%.
- **Limit hormone exposure after menopause.** Although short-term use of hormone replacement after menopause is safe, long-term use of hormones increases certain risks (stay tuned for more on this in future editions of "Ask the Doctor").
- **High Fat Diets:** There is data in the literature demonstrating that reducing the fat content of your diet results in modest reductions in breast cancer risks. It also helps to reduce your risk of other diseases such as heart disease and helps with weight control.

The concept of modifying your lifestyle in an effort to reduce your risk of breast cancer would seem consistent with the overall goals of the Be Aware Foundation. To date, our primary focus has been to motivate and inspire women to follow early detection guidelines. As our Be Aware program evolves, we anticipate expending our efforts to include further clarifications of lifestyle modification that can lower a woman's risk of developing breast cancer. In future issues of "Ask the Doctor" we will consider the question "How does a woman determine her individual risks of getting breast cancer and what can she do about it?" We hope you have found this information useful and, as always, would welcome your comments. Please contact us.