



the jill lamb foundation

Breast Cancer Risks – Family History

Family history is an important risk factor for breast cancer. Having one immediate female family member (mother, sister or daughter) with breast cancer almost doubles a woman's chance of developing breast cancer compared to a woman with no family history. If a woman has more than one immediate female family member with a history of breast cancer, her chances are increased by about three to four times compared to a woman with no female family history¹.

In general, the younger her relative was when diagnosed with breast cancer, the greater a woman's chance of getting the disease². A woman whose mother was diagnosed with breast cancer before age 50 has about twice the risk of the disease than a woman with no immediate family members with breast cancer³.

When talking about family history, it's also important to consider the men in your family. A history of breast cancer in a close male relative (father, brother, uncle), though rare, can significantly increase breast cancer risk. A history of prostate cancer in one or more immediate family members (father or brother) may also increase risk, especially if cancer was found at an early age⁴. Exactly why a family history of prostate cancer may increase breast cancer risk isn't known yet, though the risk of both cancers is influenced by blood hormone levels.

¹ Pharoah PDP, Day NE, Duggly S, Easton DF, Ponder BAJ. Family history and the risk of breast cancer: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Int J Cancer*. 71(5):800-9, 1997.

Collaborative Group on Hormonal Factors in Breast Cancer. Familial breast cancer: collaborative reanalysis of individual data from 52 epidemiological studies including 58,209 women with breast cancer and 101,986 women without the disease. *Lancet*. 358: 1389-99, 2001.

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ Valeri A, Fournier G, Morin V, et al. Early onset and familial predisposition to prostate cancer significantly enhance the probability for breast cancer in first degree relatives. *Int J Cancer*. 86: 883-7, 2000.

Anderson DE and Badzioch MD. Familial breast cancer risks. Effects of prostate and other cancers. *Cancer*. 72: 114-9, 1993.

While the increases in risk linked to family history may be due to family lifestyle factors, it can also be associated with specific genetic mutations that can increase for the risk of breast cancer. This is especially so in families with a strong family history of breast cancer, such as multiple immediate family members (mother or sister) with breast cancer or a single immediate family member diagnosed at an early age. Family history of ovarian cancer also raises suspicion of an inherited genetic mutation.