



# 25 Breast Cancer Myths

Differentiating the myths from the facts about breast cancer may help to save your life. Here are 25 common myths about breast cancer.

**1 Nobody in my family has cancer, so I will not get breast cancer.**

Less than 15% of all breast cancer is passed on genetically. Therefore the absence of family history does not reduce ones' risk of developing breast cancer.

**2 Breast cancer only occurs in middle age women.**

Breast cancer can affect women of any age. Although breast cancer most commonly affects women between 50-60 years old, it can also occur in women less than 40 years old and the elderly. About 13% of Singapore women with breast cancer are below 40 years old and 15% occur in those above 70 years of age. However, studies have shown that elderly do just as well as younger women if they receive appropriate treatment. Therefore, age alone should not be a barrier to receiving treatment.

**3 Breast cancer risk is directly related to the size of the breast. Therefore, only women with big breasts will get breast cancer.**

Breast size is unrelated to breast cancer risk. Even men can get breast cancer, although it is very rare. So size does not matter!

**4 Retained milk from breast feeding can cause breast cancer.**

On the contrary, breast feeding helps to reduce the risk of developing breast cancer. Calcium deposits in the breast are not a direct result of "retained" milk but often due to physiological changes associated with ageing.

## 5 Under-wired bra, antiperspirant and powder can cause breast cancer.

There is no scientific evidence to show that any of these can cause breast cancer. The development of breast cancer is usually a complex interplay of various factors. These could be genetic predisposition, immune system, hormonal fluctuation, environmental pollution, inappropriate lifestyle etc.

## 6 By going for regular mammograms, I can prevent myself from getting breast cancer.

Mammograms do not prevent breast cancer. Mammograms are tools for detection of early curable breast cancers to increase survival, not a prevention tool for development of breast cancers.

## 7 If my mammogram is normal, I am assured that I will not get breast cancer.

While mammography is the best screening tool for breast cancer available today, it cannot detect all breast cancers. This is because normal breast tissue can hide breast cancer, especially if the cancer is small and in young women whose breast tissue is denser. Certain types of cancer are also not readily seen on mammogram. In certain cases, an ultrasound or MRI scan may be required. The doctor will assess and advice you accordingly.

## 8 De-toxification therapy can prevent breast cancer.

People believe that detoxification treatments are to clear harmful substances from the body and stimulate the immune system to attack the cancer in the body. This is not necessary, as our body has a natural detoxification system which removes harmful substances. Besides, detoxification therapies can be harmful to health and may cause malnutrition if the person does not follow proper healthy dietary guidelines.

## 9 By improving my immune system, I will not get breast cancer.

Boosting the body's immune system does not prevent the formation or development of breast cancer cells. There is no known method that can prevent breast cancer or augment the body's immune system to kill any existing cancer

cell or tumour. Nonetheless, it is good to maintain a healthy lifestyle through regular exercise and well-balanced diet to reduce risks of other chronic diseases, such as hypertension and diabetes.

### **10 Being a vegetarian makes me immune to breast cancer.**

Being a vegetarian can be healthier as the diet may be lower in saturated fat, cholesterol and high in complex carbohydrate and fibre. However, poorly planned vegetarian diets can lead to iron and vitamin B<sub>12</sub> deficiencies, as well as insufficient calories and protein intake. Hence, it may not necessarily make a person more immune to breast cancer.

### **11 Organic food can prevent breast cancer.**

Organic foods have become increasingly popular lately. Chemicals in conventionally grown fruits and vegetables are regulated by government agencies like HSA (Health Science Authority) and AVA (Agri-Food & Veterinary Authority of Singapore) at safe level. Thus, conventionally grown fruits and vegetables are safe for consumption. More research is needed to indicate the significance of using organic fruits and vegetables to prevent breast cancer.

### **12 I take a lot of health supplements, so I will not get breast cancer.**

It is good to have a healthy, balanced diet, and to take health supplements to complement your dietary requirements of vitamins and minerals. However, there is no known prevention for breast cancer supported by scientific evidence. No single food, vitamin, or health supplement will prevent breast cancer.

### **13 If my breast self examination is normal, I do not need to go for a screening mammogram.**

A normal breast self examination does not completely exclude the possibility of one having breast cancer. Currently, mammography is still the most effective way to screen for early breast cancer. Mammograms can detect lesions as small as 0.5 cm (0.2 inches). Most lumps cannot be felt until they are at least 1 cm (0.4 inches) in size.

#### 14 Radiation from mammogram can cause breast cancer.

Women who have mammograms are inevitably exposed to very low levels of x-ray radiation because mammograms are essentially low-dose x-ray studies of the breasts. However, the benefits of mammograms, particularly for those over 40 years old, far outweigh any potential risks from the x-ray exposure. The effective radiation dose from a mammogram is about 0.7 mSv, which is about the same as what the average person receives from atmospheric radiation in three months. According to the American Cancer Society, the amount of radiation received from a mammogram is the same as what one would get from a plane trip from New York to California.

#### 15 If the lump in my breast is painless, it cannot be cancerous.

Majority of cancerous breast lumps are painless, especially in the early stages. Never ignore any breast lump, no matter how small or painless because early diagnosis and treatment results in the best outcome.

#### 16 Biopsy of the cancerous lump can cause the cancer cells to spread faster.

Studies have shown that a biopsy does not cause the spread of cancer cells. The spread of cancer cells is related to the specific features and extent of growth of the cancer e.g. whether the cancer has grown into blood vessels. A delay in diagnosis and treatment is associated with higher risk of cancer spread.

#### 17 Herbal Remedies can kill breast cancer cells.

So far there is no scientific evidence that can prove that herbal remedies can cure breast cancer. Most of the claims made are not tested by reliable large scale clinical studies. Majority of the studies on herbal remedies were conducted in animals, and have not been tested in humans. Further studies are required to determine the effectiveness of herbal remedies in treating breast cancer.

## 18 Those with breast cancer should avoid eating dairy products.

You may have heard that when people with breast cancer eat dairy products, their body produces mucus in intestinal tract which cancer cells will feed on. However this is a misconception. Actually the saturated fat in the dairy product may well be the culprit.

Whole milk dairy products contain high saturated fats. Studies have observed a 19% increased risk of breast cancer with greater intake of saturated fats. Therefore, choosing low fat dairy products with lower saturated fat would be a better option.

## 19 TCM can treat breast cancer effectively.

Although Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) had been around for thousands of years, it had yet to undergo the clinical trials used to evaluate conventional cancer therapy. As such, there is no conclusive scientific evidence to prove that TCM is effective.

However, TCM is finding a place in cancer treatment - not as a cure, but as supportive therapy that help patients feel better and recover faster. For example, acupuncture has been recognized as an effective way to manage nausea and vomiting during cancer treatment, and is also effective in controlling post-surgical pain.

## 20 Mastectomy (surgical removal of the whole breast) is the only way to treat breast cancer.

When the cancer is detected early, only the cancerous area needs to be surgically removed. This means the rest of the breast is preserved. Therefore, mastectomy is not the only option.

## 21 After breast cancer surgery, the arm on the affected side will become useless/crippled.

With better surgical technique, current breast cancer surgery does not cause disability of the arm.

**22 All those diagnosed with breast cancer will require chemotherapy.**

When breast cancer is diagnosed at the earliest stage, chemotherapy is not needed. Surgery (with or without radiotherapy) can achieve cure rates as high as 98%.

**23 Since I will die from breast cancer once diagnosed with it, it would be useless to undergo treatment that will make me suffer.**

The cure rate for breast cancer has been steadily improving. With new and better treatment modalities, patients are living longer and better even with advanced stage cancer. Side effects and complications vary and if one type of treatment does not agree with you, let the doctor know. The type and/or dose can be adjusted accordingly.

**24 Breast lumps that develop during pregnancy are due to hormonal changes and can be left alone.**

Hormonal changes during pregnancy can result in lumpiness in the breast. Although this is usually harmless, breast cancer can develop during pregnancy. Therefore, if a new lump appears, you should highlight this to your doctor.

**25 Breast cancer is contagious.**

Breast cancer is due to a change in the cells and not due to virus/bacteria, therefore it is not contagious. Hence, it is safe to share food with or hug someone with breast cancer.

**Please speak to your doctor if you need more information about breast cancer.**

**For an appointment at the  
CGH Breast Clinic, please call  
Tel : 6850 3333.**

2 Simei Street 3 Singapore 529889  
Tel: 6788 8833 Fax: 6788 0933  
Reg No 198904226R

For appointments and enquiries,  
please call the CGH Appointment Centre at  
Tel: (65) 6850 3333

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