

14 ways you can help prevent cancer



Recommendation 7 for Individuals on Breastfeeding

Breastfeed your baby for as long as possible.

Key summary

- There is strong evidence that breastfeeding decreases the risk of breast cancer in the mother.
- The more months that women continue breastfeeding their babies, the greater the protection that they will have against breast cancer.
- It is recommended that mothers start breastfeeding as soon as possible and do so for as long as they can.

Breastfeeding and cancer

Exclusive breastfeeding means that no other food or drink, not even water, except breast milk is offered to the baby (apart from vitamins, minerals, and medicines). According to the World Health Organization, exclusive breastfeeding is recommended for the first 6 months of a baby's life. After that, nutritionally adequate, complementary foods are introduced together with continued breastfeeding up to the age of 2 years or older. Breastfeeding can be done directly (breast to mouth) or by expressing or pumping breast milk.

Lactation refers to the process by which the body produces milk to breastfeed. The main mechanism by which lactation and breastfeeding influence breast cancer risk is through the hormonal changes during the period of amenorrhoea (when menstruation stops temporarily). This decreases the exposure to specific hormones, in particular androgens, which can increase cancer risk.

Breast cancer is the most commonly diagnosed cancer (29.4% of all new cases) and the most common cause of cancer death (16.7% of all cancer deaths) for women in the European Union (EU). In the EU, 1 in 11 women will develop breast cancer before the age of 74 years. These high rates highlight the importance of promoting breast cancer prevention.

Breastfeeding is of great importance for both the baby and the mother. Breastfed children have lower risks of developing type 2 diabetes, overweight, and obesity. For mothers, lactation and breastfeeding decrease the risk of breast cancer and may reduce the risk of ovarian cancer. The more months that women can continue breastfeeding, the greater the protection that they have against breast cancer.

Actions to reduce your cancer risk

Start breastfeeding as soon as possible, and breastfeed your baby for as long as you can. It is recommended that new mothers initiate breastfeeding within 1 hour of the birth of their baby, if possible. Starting breastfeeding early stimulates milk production and increases the duration of exclusive breastfeeding. Exclusive breastfeeding also stimulates high quantities of milk production, which enables an increased duration of breastfeeding. The longer you breastfeed your baby for, the higher your protection against breast cancer.

Access breastfeeding counselling sessions. Speak to your health-care professional (e.g. doctor or midwife) about accessing support to help you initiate breastfeeding as soon as possible, address any challenges, such as pain, baby having trouble latching, and swollen breasts, and continue breastfeeding for as long as you want.

Request breastfeeding support at your workplace. Advocate for positive practices that can support you to continue breastfeeding when you return to work and for as long as you want. A designated private space and flexible work breaks are important to help you to express your milk. Breastfeeding mothers can also be supported by other flexible work options, such as part-time work, teleworking, and flexible schedules.

Co-benefits for the prevention of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) with similar risk factors and opportunities for health promotion

Breastfeeding has important benefits for both the mother and the child. Women who have breastfed often have better postpartum weight loss and have a healthier weight later in life than women who have not breastfed. This helps reduce risks of obesity-related cancers and related NCDs. Women who have breastfed also have reduced risks of cardiovascular diseases and type 2 diabetes in later life. The longer the duration of breastfeeding, the greater the reduction in risk of disease.

Being breastfed is associated with healthy growth patterns in babies and helps protect them against excess weight gain. The effects of breastfeeding on children's early growth patterns also lead to favourable growth trajectories until adolescence. Breastfeeding also has benefits for child nutrition and development and the prevention of infection.

Learn about the policies that help support breastfeeding

- Sufficient duration of maternity leave enables working mothers to exclusively breastfeed their babies for the first 6 months.
- Compliance with the International Code of Marketing of Breast-Milk Substitutes safeguards breastfeeding by preventing inappropriate marketing. Formula milk and breast-milk substitutes should not be promoted but should be available when needed.
- Breastfeeding-friendly policies and information campaigns in the workplace and all public places help to protect the rights of women to breastfeed whenever and wherever they need, and also increase the cultural and social acceptability of breastfeeding.

Myths versus Facts

MYTH: You are not producing enough milk for your baby.

FACT: Almost all mothers produce the right amount of milk for their babies. The production of breast milk depends on how well the baby is latched, and the frequency and quantity of breastfeeding. Seek support from your health-care provider to tackle any difficulties.

MYTH: You shouldn't breastfeed if you are sick.

FACT: Depending on the kind of illness, and after receiving advice from a doctor, mothers can usually continue breastfeeding. The antibodies produced by the mother's body could be passed to the baby, helping the baby to build its own immune system.

MYTH: Exercise will change the taste of your milk.

FACT: Exercise is beneficial during lactation and breastfeeding, and there is no evidence that it affects the taste of breast milk.



References

Ferlay et al. (2024). Global Cancer Observatory: Cancer Today. Available from: <https://gco.iarc.fr/en>

Stordal B. (2023). Cancer Med, 12(4): 4616-4625. PMID: 36164270

World Cancer Research Fund (2024). Lactation and Cancer Risk. Available from: <https://www.wcrf.org/diet-activity-and-cancer/risk-factors/lactation-breastfeeding-and-cancer-risk/>

World Health Organization (2024). Early Initiation of Breastfeeding. Global Health Observatory. Available from: <https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/indicators/indicator-details/GHO/early-initiation-of-breastfeeding>