

# Risk and the realities

The word “cancer” understandably conjures up negative and emotive thoughts. But understanding your rate of risk might put your mind at rest.



Most of us have been guilty, at some point, of worrying that an unusual ache or a strange bruise might be a sign of cancer. Breast cancer, in particular, can be one of women’s greatest concerns. According to statistics, one in eight women will develop it over their lifetime.

But compare that to rates of cardiovascular disease (CVD), the range of conditions affecting your heart, circulation or blood vessels. It is estimated that one in four women will develop it over their lifetime. So why don’t we lie awake at night worrying about the health of our heart?

## Risk by numbers

Statistics and numbers about risk are often presented in different ways and can be quite confusing, says Jean Hailes psychologist and Head of Translation Dr Mandy Deeks.

“Some reports will talk of a 1 in 10 risk and some might use a percentage figure such as 10% risk,” says Dr Deeks. “These mean the same thing, but 10% seems larger and more risky than the 1 to some people. At other times we hear of complex calculations and terms such as relative risk versus absolute risk – so you have to know what the two mean to be able to think, ‘Am I at risk here?’”

The number we usually see quoted is absolute risk. This reflects the probability of you being diagnosed with a condition over the whole of your lifetime. It may be expressed as a percentage or as odds. A risk rate of every 1 in 25 people, for instance, translates to a 4% risk. If you have additional risk factors, such as being a smoker or a family history of the condition, this will raise your absolute risk.

## Emotional baggage

So, why are so many of us much more frightened of cancer than we are of CVD? CVD is the single largest killer of women in Australia. It is responsible for 50% of female deaths in Australia, compared to the 4% who will die due to breast cancer.

"It can be influenced by emotions," says Jean Hailes psychologist Dr Mandy Deeks. "If we make an emotional connection to something and we become frightened of it, this can also affect how we perceive risk," she says. "Something like breast cancer is talked about so often, we hear stories of women we know with breast cancer, we are frequently reminded of it. It is so close to you that it can make you feel you might also be at risk."

Heart disease, on the other hand, is more commonly associated with men. "Women may not connect with it in the same way, they do not fear it," says Dr Deeks. "Women see images of a man having a heart attack and may not be as inclined to protect themselves or get the check ups they need."

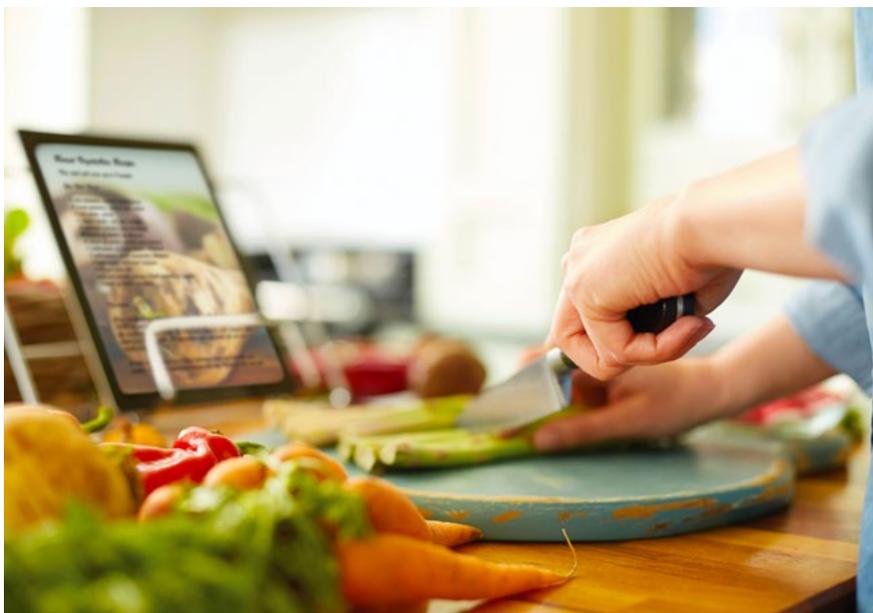
## How can I reduce risk?

According to Cancer Council Australia, up to one-third of all cancers could be linked to a poor diet, inactivity and an unhealthy body weight. For CVD, the Heart Foundation cites the main risk factors as smoking, high blood pressure and cholesterol levels and obesity.

If you can change some of these aspects of your health, you may be able to reduce your future risk of being diagnosed with a serious condition. Knowing this can help alleviate anxiety and help you feel more in control of your health.

## What cancers are Australian women most concerned about?

Let's look at the five cancers that cause Australian women most concern, their risk factors and ways to reduce your risk.



### BREAST CANCER

- The most common type of cancer in women in Australia
- 1 in 8 (or 12.5%) will be diagnosed by the age of 85
- 47 are diagnosed with breast cancer each day in Australia
- The 5 year survival rate in Australia is 89%

#### CAUSE

Unknown, but the following risk factors have been identified: family history, inherited mutation of genes (BRCA2, BRCA1 & CHEK2), increasing age, obesity, lack of exercise, excess alcohol consumption and exposure to radiation.

#### WAYS TO REDUCE RISK

Limit alcohol intake, quit smoking, maintain a healthy weight, eat a diet rich in fruit, vegetables and wholegrains, get regular exercise and limit radiation exposure. Seek medical advice if you have a family history.



### OVARIAN CANCER

- 1 in 81 (or 1.23%) will be diagnosed by the age of 85
- Every 10 hours a woman in Australia will die of ovarian cancer
- The 5 year survival rate in Australia is 43%

#### CAUSE

Unknown but risk factors may include: family history, increasing age, being of Northern European or Ashkenazi Jewish descent, early onset of periods, childlessness, infertility, having first child after 30, having some fertility treatments or never having taken oral contraceptives.

#### WAYS TO REDUCE RISK

Limit alcohol intake, quit smoking, maintain a healthy weight, eat a diet rich in fruit, vegetables and wholegrains, get regular exercise and limit radiation exposure. Seek medical advice if you have a family history.



## SKIN CANCER

- Australia has the highest rates of skin cancer in the world, with 95-99% of cases being caused by sun exposure
- Skin cancer accounts for 80% of all new cancer diagnoses each year
- The 5 year survival rate for Australian women is 94%

### CAUSE

Known risk factors: having skin sensitive to ultraviolet (UV) radiation or burns easily. Having a high number of moles (more than 10 on arms or 2000 on the body) or many unusual moles. Having a family history of skin cancer, or if you have spent a large amount of time outdoors without skin protection.

### WAYS TO REDUCE RISK

Reduce sun exposure by covering up with protective clothing, high-level sun cream and a hat. Avoid the hottest part of the day and don't sunbathe. Avoid using solariums or sunlamps. Limit alcohol intake, quit smoking, maintain a healthy weight, eat a diet rich in fruit, vegetables and wholegrains, get regular exercise and limit radiation exposure.

**You should see your doctor if you do notice a change in your body or in your general state of health.**

**If you're worried, take positive action.**

## CERVICAL CANCER

- 1 in 62 (or 1.61%) will be diagnosed by the age of 85
- 226 women died from cervical cancer in 2012
- Deaths from cervical cancer have halved since 1991, when a national screening program was introduced

### CAUSE

The main risk factors are having persistent infection with high-risk types of human papillomavirus (HPV) and smoking.

### WAYS TO REDUCE RISK

Get regular PAP tests to detect small changes in the cells of the cervix. Early detection is the key to successful treatment and in most cases can prevent cancer forming. Get the HPV vaccine, which prevents development of the virus responsible for cervical cancer. Limit alcohol intake, quit smoking, maintain a healthy weight, eat a diet rich in fruit, vegetables and wholegrains, get regular exercise and limit radiation exposure.

## BOWEL CANCER (COLORECTAL)

- 1 in 15 (or 6.67%) women will be diagnosed by the age of 85
- Bowel cancer is one of the most common cancers in Australia for both men and women
- The 5 year survival rate in Australia is 66%

### CAUSE

Known risks are inflammatory bowel disease, increasing age, inherited genetic risk, smoking and obesity.

### WAYS TO REDUCE RISK

Report any changes in bowel movement to your GP. Early warning signs may be blood in stools. Bowel cancer has been linked to undiagnosed polyps. Limit alcohol intake, quit smoking, maintain a healthy weight, eat a diet rich in fruit, vegetables and wholegrains, get regular exercise and limit radiation exposure.

 For detailed facts and figures about cancer please visit [cancer.org.au](http://cancer.org.au)

 For more information about avoiding heart disease [heartfoundation.org.au](http://heartfoundation.org.au)