

# Breast Cancer: Stats, Warning Signs and Treatment Options

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Breast cancer is a disease in which abnormal cells in the breast grow out of control and form tumors. If left unchecked, the tumors can spread throughout the body, have adverse effects on organ function and can become fatal.



In 2022, there were 2.3 million women diagnosed with breast cancer and 670 000 deaths globally. Breast cancer occurs in every country of the world in women at any age after puberty but with increasing rates in later life.

Global estimates reveal striking inequities in the breast cancer burden according to human development. For instance, in countries with a very high Human Development Index (HDI), 1 in 12 women will be diagnosed with breast cancer in their lifetime and 1 in 71 women die of it.

In contrast, in countries with a low HDI; while only 1 in 27 women is diagnosed with breast cancer in their lifetime, 1 in 48 women will die from it.

Health experts note that early onset of the disease is not life-threatening, which is the reason why early detection is often brought up as the best means to combat it – the reason why experts and organizations have been advocating for October's standing as Breast Cancer Awareness Month.

**Symptoms:**

Most people will not experience any symptoms when the cancer is still early hence the importance of early detection.

Breast cancer can have combinations of symptoms, especially when it is more advanced.

Symptoms of breast cancer can include:

- a breast lump or thickening, often without pain
- change in size, shape or appearance of the breast
- dimpling, redness, pitting or other changes in the skin
- change in nipple appearance or the skin surrounding the nipple (areola)
- abnormal or bloody fluid from the nipple. People with an abnormal breast lump should seek medical care, even if the lump does not hurt. Most breast lumps are not cancer. Breast lumps that are cancerous are more likely to be successfully treated when they are small and have not spread to nearby lymph nodes.

Breast cancers may spread to other areas of the body and trigger other symptoms. Often, the most common first detectable site of spread is to the lymph nodes under the arm although it is possible to have cancer-bearing lymph nodes that cannot be felt.

Over time, cancerous cells may spread to other organs including the lungs, liver, brain and bones. Once they reach these sites, new cancer-related symptoms such as bone pain or headaches may appear.

**Treatment:**

Treatment for breast cancer depends on the subtype of cancer and how much it has spread outside of the breast to lymph nodes (stages II or III) or to other parts of the body (stage IV).

Doctors combine treatments to minimize the chances of the cancer coming back (recurrence). These include:

- surgery to remove the breast tumor
- radiation therapy to reduce recurrence risk in the breast and surrounding tissues
- medications to kill cancer cells and prevent spread, including hormonal therapies, chemotherapy or targeted biological therapies.

Treatments for breast cancer are more effective and are better tolerated when started early and taken to completion.