

MHT and breast cancer risk

This factsheet can help you talk to your doctor about the benefits and risks of **menopausal hormone therapy** (MHT) and how it may affect your risk of breast cancer.

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for Women's Health

Funded by the Australian Government through the Quality Use of Diagnostics, Therapeutics and Pathology Program.



What do we mean by risk factors?

A risk factor is anything that can increase your chance of developing a condition such as breast cancer. But having risk factors does not automatically mean you will get that condition.

Some risk factors cannot be changed, like your age or genetics. But you can change many risk factors – for example, your diet and how much alcohol you drink.

In Australia, **1 in 7 women** will develop breast cancer in their lifetime.



Every woman's risk of breast cancer is different.

Putting risk in perspective

When you're considering the risk of anything, it's important to think about it in a balanced way.

For example, flying can seem scary, but a lot more people get hurt in car accidents.

Understanding what risk factors affect you can help you make an informed choice.

Taking MHT does not greatly increase your risk of breast cancer. In fact, there is greater risk with not getting enough exercise, being overweight, or drinking alcohol regularly.

The main risk factors for breast cancer are:

- increased **breast density** (which will show up on a mammogram)
- your **age**
- **genetic factors** or a **family history** of breast cancer
- going through **menopause later in life**
- being assigned **female** at birth. (This may be different if you have received gender-affirming care).

These risks can't be changed. Your doctor might call these **non-modifiable risk factors**.

Most cases of breast cancer are not due to MHT use.

While MHT **may** affect your breast cancer risk, there are several common things that **will** increase your risk of breast cancer. These include:

- having a weight that is above the healthy range
- not getting enough physical activity
- drinking alcohol.

These are examples of things **you can change**, and it helps if you get the right support and information. Your doctor might call these **modifiable risk factors**.

Benefits of MHT

MHT is effective for relieving common menopausal symptoms like:



hot
flushes



vaginal
dryness



night sweats
that affect
your sleep

It can also help with mood changes after menopause.

Some research suggests MHT may ease aches and pains in your muscles and joints, help to maintain bone health, and lower the risk of diabetes.

Your doctor should explain all the risks and benefits of MHT to help you decide if it's the right choice for you.

Many different types of MHT are available in Australia.

Different types of MHT have different risks

The level of breast cancer risk differs depending on:

- the type of MHT and the dose
- what age you start MHT
- if the MHT includes a hormone called progestogen and which type
- how long you take MHT for.

Your doctor will consider these things before you start using MHT.



patch



cream



tablet

Managing your risk

Many things we do each day involve risk, but we take steps to manage it. For example, we wear seatbelts and follow road rules to reduce our risk of injury in a car accident.

Whether or not you decide to take MHT, there are a few ways you can reduce your breast cancer risk. These include:



reaching or
maintaining
a healthy
weight



getting more
physical
activity



cutting
down on
alcohol



quitting
smoking.

Taking part in the **BreastScreen Australia program** can give you peace of mind and help pick up early signs of breast cancer. It's also a good idea to get into the habit of **regular breast self-checks**.



What is the best choice for me?

Remember, everyone's risk is different. A doctor can help you understand your personal risk and decide whether MHT is right for you.

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Disclaimer: This information does not replace medical advice. If you are worried about your health, talk to your doctor or healthcare team. We write health information for people with diverse backgrounds, experiences and identities. We use the term 'women', but we acknowledge that this term is not inclusive of all people who may use our content.

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