

breast
cancer
care

the breast cancer
support charity



Men with breast cancer

Diagnosed with breast cancer

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Introduction

This pack is about breast cancer in men. It includes information about types of breast cancer in men, and how breast cancer is diagnosed and treated. There's also information for men who have come to the end of their hospital-based treatment and may have questions or concerns about moving forward after treatment.

We're aware that a lot of information about breast cancer is aimed at women. We've included as much information as possible in this pack that's relevant to men. However, you may want to know more about certain topics, for example specific drug treatments. Breast Cancer Care has publications and online information on many of these subjects. Where relevant, we've included the names of other publications which you can order or download from our website [**www.breastcancercare.org.uk**](http://www.breastcancercare.org.uk)

We hope this pack helps you to understand more about breast cancer in men and to discuss any questions you might have with your specialist team.



Breast cancer in men

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Breast cancer in men

Breast cancer in men is rare, with around 350 men diagnosed each year in the UK (compared to nearly 55,000 women). This means that less is known about the experiences of men with breast cancer and most of the available information about breast cancer is aimed at women. It also means that most of the research into breast cancer and its treatments has been carried out in women.

Many people are unaware that men can develop breast cancer because they do not think of men as having breasts. In fact, both men and women have breast tissue.

'I sometimes feel a bit awkward saying that I have had breast cancer because before breast cancer I thought that breasts were what women had, that they stuck out on the chest at least five centimetres, something that did not include me.'

David S

Breast tissue in men

Breast tissue develops while you're in the womb. During this time, the breasts form small branching tubes (called ducts) behind the nipple. Until boys reach their teenage years and puberty, their breast tissue is the same as that of girls. When they reach puberty, however, increased hormone levels affect the further development of the breast tissue.

In girls, the hormone oestrogen causes the breasts to grow and milk-producing glands (called lobules) to form at the end of the ducts. This is so a woman's breasts are able to carry milk to the nipple.

Boys also have higher levels of oestrogen during puberty. But by the end of their teenage years higher levels of the hormone testosterone stop the effect of oestrogen on breast tissue. The lobules are then unable to grow, the small number of ducts stay as they were and the chest area usually flattens out.

Breast cancer in men usually begins in the ducts. For more information on types of breast cancer in men, see page 24.

Symptoms of breast cancer in men

Symptoms of breast cancer include:

- a lump, often painless. This is the most common symptom. It's usually near the centre, close to the nipple, because most of the breast tissue in men is beneath the nipple. But lumps can also occur away from the nipple
- nipple discharge, often blood-stained
- a tender or drawn in (inverted) nipple
- ulceration or swelling of the chest area.

Occasionally, the lymph nodes (glands) under the arm may also be swollen.

Because breast cancer in men is so rare, a man might ignore any symptoms and postpone seeing his GP. In some cases, this may mean that the cancer is already at a later stage when it's diagnosed.

The sooner breast cancer is diagnosed and treated, the better the outcome may be, so it's important to get any symptoms checked out as quickly as possible.

'I just found a lump. At the time I did not know that men could get breast cancer.'

David S

Risk factors

The exact causes of breast cancer in men are not fully understood, but certain factors may increase the risk. These are called risk factors.

Age

The most important risk factor is increasing age. Most men who get breast cancer are over 60, although younger men can be affected.

Radiation

People who have had previous radiotherapy treatment to the chest, for example to treat Hodgkin's lymphoma (Hodgkin's disease), may have a slightly increased risk of developing breast cancer. This increased risk is related to the long-term effects of radiation on normal healthy tissue, not because anything has gone wrong with the treatment.

Obesity

Obesity (being very overweight) increases the chance of men developing breast cancer. Obese people have higher levels of oestrogen in the body and this can play a part in the growth of breast cancer cells (see below).

Significant family history

A small number of men have an increased risk of developing breast cancer because they have a significant family history. A family history records past and present cancers of your blood relatives (people related by birth, not marriage) over several generations.

This increased risk may be because they have inherited an altered gene. The most common altered genes that increase the risk of breast cancer are called BRCA1 (BReast CAncer1) and BRCA2 (BReast CAncer2). BRCA2 is most commonly associated with breast cancer in men (BRCA1 less so).

Men with an altered BRCA gene carry a lifetime risk of developing breast cancer of less than 10%.

If you're concerned about your family history, the first step is to talk to a healthcare professional, such as your GP (local doctor).

You can also read our booklet **Breast cancer in families**.

High oestrogen levels

Some breast cancers are stimulated by hormones (chemical messengers) to grow. Oestrogen is the main female hormone linked to breast cancer development. All men have a small amount of oestrogen as well as male hormones.

Men appear to be at greater risk of developing breast cancer if they have higher than normal levels of oestrogen. High oestrogen levels can occur in men because of:

- chronic (long-term) liver damage, particularly cirrhosis
- obesity (being very overweight)
- some genetic conditions, for example Klinefelter's syndrome.

Klinefelter's syndrome

This is a very rare genetic condition which can increase a man's risk of breast cancer. Of all breast cancers diagnosed in men, 3–4% occur in those who have Klinefelter's syndrome.

