

***“Drink more tea! Eat more vegetables! Throw out your antiperspirant! Exercise regularly!”***

Women are bombarded with advice on how to reduce their risk for breast cancer. What you often don't hear is that none of these methods can guarantee you won't get breast cancer, and much of this advice is based on inconclusive –and, sometimes, nonexistent- evidence. Before you start buying broccoli by the bushel, consider these facts about risk:

- **Risk reduction is not the same as prevention.**

Until we know the causes of breast cancer, we cannot prevent it. Methods of risk reduction may lower your chances, but they don't make you immune.

- **50%-70% of people with breast cancer have none of the known risk factors besides age.**

Not including being over age 50, the “known” risk factors for breast cancer - starting menstruation before age 12, starting menopause after age 55, a family history of breast cancer, having children after age 30 or no childbirth, hormone replacement, alcohol consumption and ionizing radiation - are present in only 30%-50% of breast cancer patients.

- **Risk factors do not cause cancer.**

Finding out you are at “high risk” for breast cancer means you have a high number of risk factors for the disease. Having one or more risk factors does not mean you will develop cancer.

- **Measuring individual risk is still a matter of guesswork.**

Risk assessment is based on studies of large numbers of people. While these statistics are helpful at measuring trends, they are far less effective in calculating an individual's risk.

- **“One in 8 women will develop breast cancer.”**

This much quoted statistic is an individual's cumulative risk over an 85-year lifetime. It does not mean that at any given point in time one out of every 8 women has breast cancer. Rather, it means if all women lived to be 85, 1 in 8 would develop the disease sometime during her life. The good news is that six out of seven people will never get breast cancer. The bad news is that 30 years ago, 13 out of 14 people never would.

- **Numbers aren't always what they seem.**

Pay attention to the real numbers behind the statistics. There's a difference between relative and absolute risk. For example, imagine a study with 200 people. 100 people eat prunes, and the other 100 don't. One person in the prune-eating group gets cancer, while 4 in the non-prune eating group do. While only three more people of the 100 non-prune eaters develop cancer (meaning the absolute risk of developing cancer for non-prune eaters is 3%), the relative risk reduction from eating prunes is 75% (three divided by the four) – a much more impressive sounding number.

- **It will take fundamental changes in society to truly prevent breast cancer.**

There is growing evidence that our increasing use of pesticides and environmental toxins is making us sick. Despite this fact, the predominant message in risk reduction is “exercise and eat right.” It is far easier to tell people to eat less fat than it is to get corporations to stop using harmful chemicals. While it may seem easier for us to change our lifestyles than to push for changes in society, it may be the only way we can stop the epidemic.

- **Join us as we prepare for the changes that will lead to true prevention and a real cure.**

Subscribe to Breast Cancer Action's newsletter for up-to-date information on policy changes that impact your breast health, on treatment options, and actions you can take to end the breast cancer epidemic.