

# Women and Cancer



**Cancer  
Council**  
Western Australia

## How many women get cancer?

In 2006 in Australia, 45,534 women were diagnosed with cancer and 17,206 died from it (see Table 1 for comparison with men). Women have a one in three (33 per cent) risk of being diagnosed with cancer before age 85, compared with a one in two (50 per cent) risk for men. Generally, risk increases with age for both sexes.

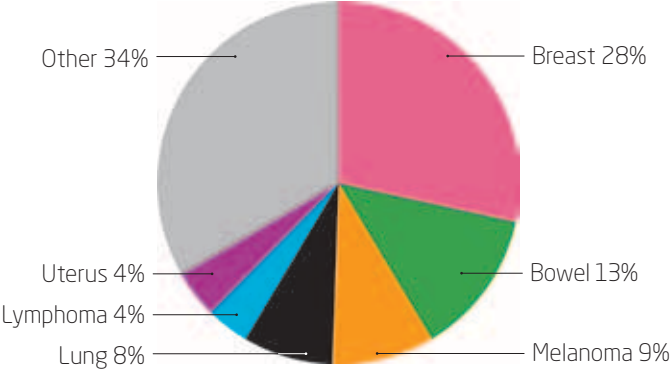
**Table 1: Women's health in Australia**

	Men	Women	Total
Population	10,660,917 49.7%	10,770,864 <b>50.3%</b>	21,431,781
Cancer cases	59,058 56.5%	45,534 <b>43.5%</b>	104,592
Cancer deaths	22,178 56.3%	17,206 <b>43.7%</b>	39,384
Lifetime cancer (to 85 years)	1 in 2	1 in 3	
Life expectancy at birth	78.7 years	<b>83.5 years</b>	

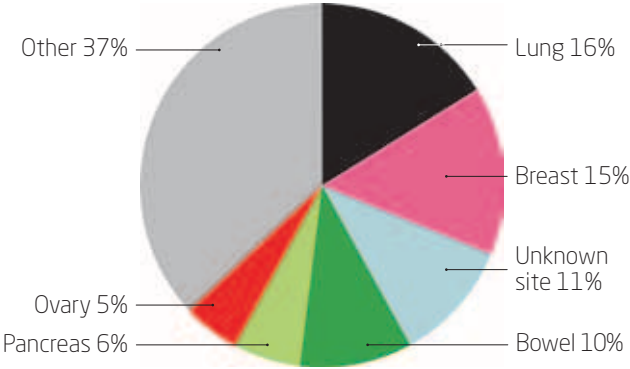
## Cancers that affect women

Breast cancer and gynaecological cancers (cancers affecting female reproductive systems) are not the only types of cancers that affect women. After breast cancer, the most common types of cancers that affect women living in Australia are bowel cancer, melanoma, and lung cancer. More women die from lung cancer than any other cancer, followed by breast and bowel cancers.

**Figure 1:**  
**Cancer diagnoses in Australian women, 2006**



**Figure 2:**  
**Deaths from cancer in Australian women, 2006**



## **Breast cancer**

Breast cancer is the most commonly diagnosed cancer among women. Each year, more than 1,300 women in Western Australia are diagnosed with breast cancer. Age, previous history, family history and lifestyle factors are important risk factors. There is a greater chance of being treated successfully when breast cancer is detected early.

## **Bowel cancer**

Bowel cancer is another common cancer in women. In WA in 2008, 526 women were diagnosed with bowel cancer and 187 died from the disease. There are steps women can take to reduce their risk of bowel cancer, such as maintaining a healthy weight, being physically active, eating a healthy diet and drinking less alcohol. Like most cancers, bowel cancer can be treated most effectively if detected early.

## **Skin cancer**

Australia has the highest rate of skin cancer in the world. Over 433,000 Australians are diagnosed with skin cancer every year and around 1,600 people die from skin cancer every year. Melanoma, the most serious form of skin cancer, is the second most common cancer in Western Australian women aged 15 - 39 years and remains in the top four most common cancers in women over 40 years.

The risk of developing skin cancer increases if you have fair skin, light hair or eyes, suffered sunburn in the past, have a large number of freckles or moles, have a family or personal history of skin cancer, work or spend a lot of time in the sun, or have used a solarium. With adequate use of sun protection, skin cancer is largely preventable and, if detected early, most skin cancers can be treated successfully.

## **Lung cancer**

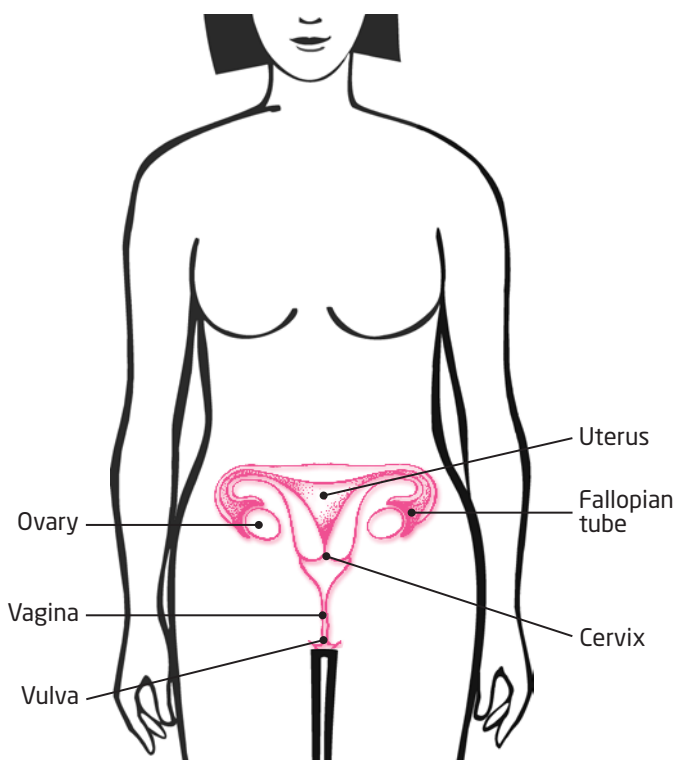
Despite being a mostly preventable disease, lung cancer is still one of the most commonly diagnosed cancers and the leading cause of cancer deaths among Western Australian women. In WA in 2008, 382 women were diagnosed with lung cancer and 290 died from the disease. Most cases of lung cancer can be attributed to cigarette smoking.

## **Gynaecological Cancers**

Gynaecological cancers develop within the female reproductive system (see diagram on next page). Gynaecological cancers can occur in women of all ages, but they are most common in women over the age of 50.

## **Cervical cancer**

Cervical cancer is one of the most preventable of all cancers. Even so, in 2008 in WA, there were 98 new cases of cervical cancer and 11 deaths. The Pap smear has been important in reducing the number



of new cases and deaths from this cancer. Between 1991 and 2002 the number of new cases of cervical cancer almost halved among women aged 20 to 69. This decline is a result of the introduction of the National Cervical Screening Program (Pap smears).

## Ovarian cancer

Because it is difficult to detect in its early stages, there are more deaths from ovarian cancer than any other gynaecological cancer. In WA in 2008, 110 women were diagnosed with ovarian cancer and 79 died from the disease.

A family history of breast or ovarian cancer may increase your risk of ovarian cancer. The amount of oestrogen you are exposed to over your lifetime can also influence your risk. Having few or no pregnancies, early age at first period and/or late menopause increases the amount of oestrogen you are exposed to, which can increase your risk of ovarian cancer.

## **Uterine cancer**

Uterine (womb) cancer is the most common gynaecological cancer, with 167 new cases in WA in 2008 and 31 deaths. Having few or no pregnancies, early age at first period and/or late menopause increases your lifetime exposure to oestrogen, which may in turn increase your risk of uterine cancer. Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and tamoxifen (a drug sometimes used to treat breast cancer) have also been linked to increased risk of developing uterine cancer.

## **Vulval and vaginal cancer**

Both of these cancers are very rare. In WA in 2008, 23 women were diagnosed with vulval cancer and eight died from the disease. In the same year, there were 13 new cases and seven deaths from vaginal cancer. With less common cancers, it is often not as well known what increases a woman's risk, but it is thought that human papillomavirus (HPV) may be linked to the development of vaginal and vulval cancers.

## What you can do

### Stop smoking

Smoking is the biggest cause of preventable death and disease in Australia. Around one in seven women (14.5 per cent) in Western Australia still smokes daily. Quitting smoking at any age not only increases your life expectancy, it also has immediate benefits such as reduced heart rate and blood pressure. There are a number of support services available if you are thinking of quitting. Talk to your doctor or call the Quitline 13 7848 for free information and confidential counselling. For extra support to quit, register with one of the Cancer Council WA's *Fresh Start* courses. More information is available from the Cancer Council Helpline 13 11 20.



**FreshStart**

A BETTER WAY TO QUIT

## Avoid or limit alcohol

While evidence shows that drinking small amounts of alcohol may protect postmenopausal women against heart disease, there is no evidence to suggest that it reduces cancer risk. In fact, drinking alcohol increases the risk of many different types of cancer including mouth, liver, breast, and bowel cancers. For this reason, alcohol is not recommended for health benefits.



It is recommended that women limit their alcohol intake to no more than two standard drinks per day. One standard drink contains 10 grams of alcohol. In Australia, packaged alcoholic drinks are required to state the number of standard drinks.

Alcohol also contains a lot of energy (kilojoules or calories) - similar to the amount in soft drink - and can contribute to weight gain.

## Be SunSmart

On an average summer weekend, 12 percent of Australian women get sunburnt. Exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation from the sun (especially during childhood) is a major risk factor for skin cancer. Western Australia experiences high levels of UV radiation for most of the year, so it's important to use sun protection between 10 am and 3 pm when UV levels are most intense. Be SunSmart and protect yourself from skin cancer in five ways by following these simple steps:



Slip on sun protective clothing



Slop on SPF 30+ sunscreen



Slap on a hat



Seek shade

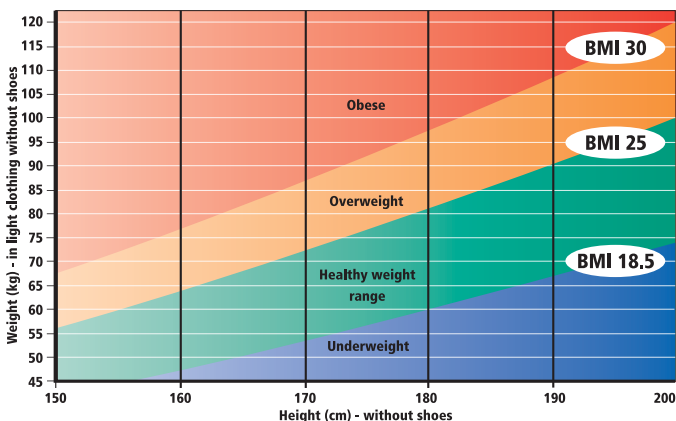


Slide on some sunglasses

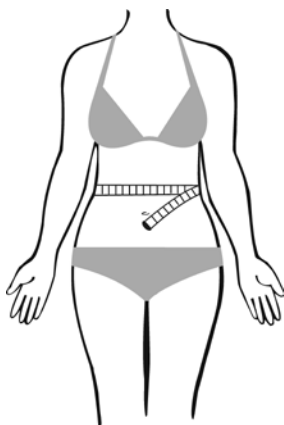
## Stay in shape

Of all developed countries in the world Australia has one of the highest rates of obesity, with almost half of adult women being classified as overweight or obese. Overweight and obesity are known risk factors for bowel, breast (postmenopausal), oesophageal, pancreatic, endometrial and kidney cancers, along with a range of other chronic diseases.

If you are overweight, the first step is to stop gaining weight. Then aim for steady weight loss. Increase your physical activity levels and eat according to your energy needs. Aim for a body mass index (BMI) between 18.5 and 24.9 kg/m<sup>2</sup>.



Another useful measure is waist circumference. Women should aim for a waist circumference of less than 80cm. Speak to your doctor or accredited practising dietitian if you are having trouble reaching a healthy weight.



## **Move your body**

Physical activity is necessary for good health. Regular physical activity is likely to protect against cancer of the bowel, breast (postmenopausal) and endometrium (lining of the womb), and has also been linked to a reduced risk of lung, pancreas and breast (premenopausal) cancers. Physical activity also helps to reduce the risk of a range of chronic diseases.

Research shows that only about half (52 per cent) of women living in Western Australia do enough physical activity to achieve health benefits. Women are less likely to engage in adequate levels of physical activity than men.

If you are not physically active, try to gradually increase your levels of planned exercise (eg aerobics classes, team sports, going for a walk or swim) and incidental physical activity (eg gardening, taking the stairs instead of the lift, walking instead of driving to work).

It doesn't have to be strenuous to be effective, but vigorous activity does offer additional benefits. When you engage in moderate-intensity activity (eg brisk walking), you should notice a slight increase in your breathing and heart rate, and still be able to talk comfortably. Vigorous activity (eg jogging, aerobics, sports such as netball and squash) will cause you to "huff and puff", and make holding a conversation difficult.

For good health, aim for at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity activity a day. This can be accumulated in blocks of 10 minutes. The more physically active you are, the lower your risk of cancer. So as your fitness improves, aim for at least 60 minutes of moderate-intensity activity or 30 minutes of vigorous-intensity activity every day.



## **Eat for health**

Average energy (calorie or kilojoule) intake has been increasing over time, contributing to the increase in overweight and obesity in Australia. Most women still do not eat enough fruit and vegetables for good health. How much and what you eat can influence your risk of cancer and your health in general.

As there is no one food that protects against cancer, it is recommended that you include a variety of nutritious foods in your diet.

Eating at least 2 serves of fruit and 5 serves of vegetables every day is recommended for good health. Fresh fruit and vegetables are the best, but frozen, dried or canned are good alternatives.

Aim to eat at least 4 serves of breads and cereals each day. Include a variety of wholegrain foods, which have been shown to be helpful for weight control.

Diets high in red and processed meat increase the risk of bowel cancer. Eat only moderate amounts



(65-100g) of red meat 3-4 times a week, and limit consumption of processed meats (salami, bacon and ham). Poultry, seafood, eggs, nuts and legumes are good alternatives to red meat.

## **Get vaccinated**

Certain types of human papillomavirus (HPV), a common viral infection, have been identified as the biggest risk factor for cervical cancer. There are over 200 different types of HPV and most infect cells of the skin and mucosa, producing no signs of disease. There are about 15 types that increase the risk of cancer (high-risk). However, the types associated with warts on the skin are considered low risk for cancer.

Human papillomavirus (HPV) infection usually occurs in the early years of sexual activity or with a new sexual partner. Four in five women will have HPV at some stage during their lives, making it the most common sexually transmitted infection among women.

Persistent long-term infection with high-risk HPV types can result in the development of cancers. For women this includes cancer of the cervix, vulva and vagina. HPV has been found in almost 100 per cent of cervical cancers and over 40 per cent of vulval and vaginal cancers.

Cancer is a rare complication of high-risk HPV infection. It is important to remember that most people who become infected with HPV will not

develop cancer. Vaccination against high-risk HPV has the potential to prevent up to 70 per cent of cervical cancers. The impact of the vaccine on other genital cancers is not yet known.

Even if you have received a HPV vaccination, it is important that you still have regular Pap smears.

## Finding cancer early

### Breast cancer

Like most cancers, breast cancer is more easily and successfully treated if detected in its early stages. Learning how your breasts change and feel at different times will help you to understand what is normal for you. Most breast changes are not due to cancer, but you should see your doctor immediately if you notice any of the following unusual changes:

- A lump, lumpiness or thickening in the breast or armpit
- Dimpling, puckering or redness of the skin
- Changes to the nipple (eg inversion, new discharge or itchy, ulcerated skin)
- New persistent pain

Women aged 50-69 should have a free mammogram (breast x-ray) at BreastScreen WA every two years.



## **Bowel cancer**

Bowel cancer can be treated more successfully if detected early. It is recommended that women over 50 be screened for bowel cancer every two years using a faecal occult blood test (FOBT). FOBTs detect small traces of blood in bowel motions, which can be (but is not necessarily) a sign of bowel cancer. People with a positive FOBT result are referred to a specialist for more tests for bowel cancer. If you are over 50, see your GP about screening for bowel cancer. Some women will be eligible for the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program and will receive an FOBT kit in the mail.

If you experience any of the following symptoms, it is important to see your GP as soon as possible:

- Bleeding from the rectum or sign of blood after a bowel motion
- Change in bowel habit (straining or loose stools)
- Abdominal pain or bloating
- Loss of appetite or weight for no obvious reason
- Unexplained tiredness, weakness or breathlessness

## **Skin cancer**

Regular skin checks increase your chance of finding skin cancer at an early and highly treatable stage. You should check your whole body, as skin cancers can sometimes occur on areas not exposed to the sun. If you see a spot that has changed in size, shape

or colour, or a non-healing sore, see your GP as soon as you can. You can also ask your GP for a skin examination if there are areas you can't see properly or if you are unsure what to look for.

## **Cervical cancer**

Cervical cancer is one of the most preventable of all cancers. Most women with precancerous cell changes will not have any symptoms. Experiencing symptoms typically means a cancer has developed. Symptoms may include irregular bleeding, discomfort or bleeding during or after sexual intercourse, or unusual vaginal discharge. Pelvic pain, swollen legs, excessive tiredness or backache may be symptoms of more advanced cancer.

To increase the chance of detecting cervical cancer early, women should have a Pap smear every two years from the age of 18 until the age of 70. You should still have regular Pap smears even if you have received the HPV vaccination. The Pap smear detects precancerous cells on the cervix, which can be treated before they become cancer. After 70 years of age your GP may advise you it's safe to stop.

## **Other gynaecological cancers**

There are currently no screening tests for ovarian, uterine, vaginal or vulval cancers. Your doctor may do a pelvic examination when you have a Pap smear. This involves looking at the vulva and vagina, and

feeling the uterus and ovaries. Gynaecological cancers can be very difficult to detect. Being given the all clear after a pelvic examination does not guarantee that cancer is not present.

It is important to be aware of the following symptoms and talk to your doctor if you notice any abnormal changes that persist for more than 3-4 weeks. Do keep in mind that these symptoms are common to many conditions, and most women who experience them will not have cancer.

- Abnormal vaginal bleeding
  - Bleeding after sexual intercourse
  - If postmenopausal - bleeding which occurs 6 months or more after menopause
  - If perimenopausal (transitioning into menopause) - persistent bleeding between period
  - If you still have your period - bleeding/spotting not associated with your period, or more frequent periods than usual
- Abnormal vaginal discharge
- Lower abdominal swelling and/or discomfort
- Pain
  - Painful or difficult urination
  - Pain during sexual intercourse
- Changes in bowel or bladder function
- Severe itchiness and/or changes to the vulva

## What can women do?

- Stop smoking
- Move your body
- Stay in shape
- Eat for health
- Be SunSmart
- Avoid alcohol
- Talk to your doctor about cancer

For further information contact:



statewide for the cost of a local call  
Weekdays 8 am - 6 pm

**Cancer Council Western Australia**  
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