



Caring Women: Is a teenage girl you care about at risk for breast cancer? A PAD Parent Resource

This pamphlet is written for mothers and other caring women in the lives of teenage and young adult women. This pamphlet gives caring women the facts about the links between alcohol and other lifestyle factors and the increased risk for developing breast cancer later in life.

“Take it from a young woman who’s had breast cancer. I wish it had been talked about. I wish I had known more about the links between cancer and lifestyle when I was younger.” - Kelly, Breast Cancer Survivor, aged 30

Is a teenage girl you care about at risk for breast cancer? Evidence says – she could be.

What’s the risk? Research has shown that the following three lifestyle factors carry a risk of breast cancer: unhealthy eating, not enough physical activity, and too much alcohol. Here’s what we know:

- **Eating:** The risk of breast cancer is likely to increase with unhealthy eating habits.
- **Physical activity:** The risk of breast cancer increases for girls and young women who do not exercise regularly.
- **Alcohol:** The risk of breast cancer increases with every alcoholic drink consumed. All drinks carry the same risk – beer, wine, liquor.

Why are teenage girls at risk?

When girls are young, moms or caregivers often make sure they get healthy food and drinks and exercise. As they get older, teens start to make their own choices on what to eat, drink and do. Research shows that when girls enter their teens, they often adopt unhealthy eating habits, drink more alcohol, and become less physically active. These lifestyle patterns cluster at this age, and can become fixed for life. **So what they do now can affect their breast health forever.**

Why are you the best messenger?

A survey of women in Ontario found that most think that teenage girls should have information on the risk of breast cancer. Plus, a recent study of girls aged 16 to 20 found that they want to hear about serious issues – like breast cancer - from women they trust: mothers, older sisters, special teachers and others. A common thread throughout both studies was a desire for facts and personal stories.

“I was 29 when I was diagnosed with stage II breast cancer. No one has breast cancer or ovarian cancer in my family. There is no evidence on what caused me to have breast cancer.

The only thing I can reason is the impact of environmental factors and lifestyle. When I was in high school I was binge drinking, binge eating then throwing up and yo-yo dieting with inconsistent exercise regime. This lifestyle continued into my early twenties while I was at university.

I would hope that my story has an impact on young women and how they treat their bodies.”

- One woman’s personal story from the project report

What do the experts say?

Eating: We know that teenage girls tend to diet or eat junk food. They are more exposed to unhealthy, fatty foods. We also know that maintaining a healthy weight can be a factor in reducing the risk of breast cancer. And we know that a diet rich in vegetables and fruit, whole grains and foods low in fat and sugar is a teenage girl's best bet for a life-time healthy body. (See Canada's Food Guide for food choices for every age group.)

Physical Activity: Many girls become less physically active in their teens. School work, computers, cell phones and non-active socializing become more important than sports, the gym, or even walking. Yet girls and young women who exercise regularly as teens have a substantially lower risk of breast cancer in the future, compared to those who are less active.

Alcohol: Younger teenage girls start to experiment with alcohol, while older girls often binge drink. The Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation says there is evidence that drinking alcohol leads to an increased risk of breast cancer. Even low levels of alcohol (more than 1 drink a day) can increase a woman's risk of developing breast cancer. And the more alcohol consumed, the greater the risk.

How would you talk to a teenage girl you care about?

Here's what women in the survey said.

- Give her the facts on how she can reduce the risks.
- Focus on the positives, the good things she's doing now.
- Talk about balance in life.
- Emphasize that taking care of her body now will last a lifetime.
- Talk about how she can treat her body with respect.
- Send her to a website or blog to get unbiased information: e.g hookuptobreastcancerprevention.ca

What exactly do I tell her?

Find out as much as you can about breast cancer prevention. As a start, here are three tips:

- 1. Increase your vegetables and fruit to 7 servings a day.** Currently less than half of females in Ontario 18+ have 7 servings a day. (A Report on Cancer 2020, 2006)
- 2. Add 30 minutes to your daily physical activity.** Less than half of females in Ontario 18+ are active enough to reduce the risk of breast cancer. (A report on Cancer 2020, 2006)
- 3. Decrease alcohol intake; or if you don't drink, don't start.** A 2011 survey found about 22% of female high school students drink five or more drinks at one time at least once a month. About 8% of girls drink this much two or three times a month. (Ontario Student Drug and Health Survey, 2011)

Don't other things cause cancer?

There are many things that put a person at risk for breast cancer. Some you can't change – like being a woman, getting older and family history.

Some risks can be controlled.

If you care about a teenage girl help her to reduce her risk of breast cancer. Here's how:

- 1. Eat smart.**
- 2. Get physical.**
- 3. Limit the alcohol.**

Find out more about breast health and the risk of breast cancer from the following sites:

www.hookuptobreastcancerprevention.ca and **www.cbcf.org**