

## **The Breast Defense: Clearing up the truth about cancer**

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Do you remember back in high school, when you found out that Suzie dumped Jake to go out with Troy, but it was, like, totally okay because it turns out that Jake had been cheating on her for months with that Amanda girl? But do you also remember finding out that “that Amanda girl” didn’t actually exist, that Suzie and Jake had merely had a fight and were (whew!) still the cutest couple ever, and how ridiculous you felt upon realization that you had not only received false information but helped to spread it as well? How could that happen? Your sources – friends of friends who knew cousins of neighbors – had seemed so reliable. Ah, to think there was ever a time when you believed everything you heard without question.

Well apparently, not much has changed since high school. Older, but not necessarily wiser, we still tend to take what we hear at face value, and information about our health is no exception. October is National Breast Cancer Awareness month and there is more information than usual out there about taking preventative measures, treatments options and coping with breast cancer. Not all of that information, however, is coming from reliable sources and it seems there are some common misconceptions that the general public has about breast cancer. We spoke to some breast cancer educators and counselors to find out some of the most widespread cancer myths. Read further for some good, juicy gossip that we actually want you to spread.

### **Myth: Breast Cancer is a contagious disease.**

**Fact:** Cancer cells grow in the body when the process of cell production is interrupted, and new cells grow despite the need for them. The surplus of cells forms a growth or tumor, which may or may not be cancerous. Because cancer stems from cell production in the body, no one can “catch” breast cancer from another person, whether through casual or intimate relations. Furthermore, no amount of bumping, bruising or touching of the breast can cause cancer cells to grow.

### **Myth: Breast cancer is a disease exclusive to women**

**Fact:** The National Breast Cancer Foundation estimates that 1,600 men will be diagnosed with breast cancer and 400 will die. Although this number is comparatively low to the estimated 211,000 women who will be diagnosed with the disease this year, the fact remains: Men can get breast cancer.

### **Myth: Only women with a family history of breast cancer are at risk**

**Fact:** While having a mother or grandmother who suffered from breast cancer increases your risk for disease, many women who get breast cancer have no family history of the disease.

### **Myth: Antiperspirants or deodorants can cause cancer**

**Fact:** “This one makes the rounds every few years,” says Phyllis Embrey, a member of the Louisiana Breast Cancer Task Force and executive director at the Cancer Association of Greater New Orleans. The people at Breast Cancer Action trace this old wives tale to

the perception that the underarm product inhibits the body from purging toxins, an explanation BCA calls “way too simple and explanation for a way too complicated disease.” Although there are ongoing studies regarding the links between antiperspirant and deodorant use and breast cancer, researchers have yet to find evidence to support this common theory.

**Myth: Abortion and miscarriage increases breast cancer risk**

**Fact:** While doctors have found that certain factors – including age, personal and family history, reproductive and menstrual history, and obesity after menopause – do increase a person’s chance of developing cancer, abortion and miscarriage are not included on that list.

**Myth: Mammograms prevent breast cancer**

**Fact:** Although mammograms may help detect breast cancer at an early stage – thus increasing one’s likelihood of surviving – there is no guarantee that early detection of a cancerous tumor will lead to full recovery. Furthermore, mammograms are not always 100 percent accurate at detecting tumors; they may result in false negatives as well as false positives. A recent study in *The New England Journal of Medicine* found that an MRI in addition to a mammogram was better at finding tumors that were both smaller and less likely to have spread to lymph nodes. MRIs, however, are expensive and may be overly-sensitive. Other means of detection include clinical breast exams and breast self-exams.

**Myth: Breast cancer can be prevented**

**Fact:** Although one may not possess any of the traits attributed to having an increased risk for getting breast cancer, that does not mean they cannot still develop the disease. While there are measures a person can take to decrease the risk of getting breast cancer, doctors have yet to figure out for certain what causes the disease.

**Myth: Women under 40 don’t need to worry about breast cancer**

**Fact:** Just like men, women in their 20s and 30s may have a lower chance of getting breast cancer, but they are by no means immune to the disease. For women beginning at the age of 20, The National Breast Cancer Foundation recommends monthly breast self-exams (to look for any changes in the breasts) and clinical breast examinations every three years until the age of 39. Once a woman turns 40, she should get a clinical exam on a yearly basis.

**Myth: If you find a lump in your breast, you have cancer**

**Fact:** The good news is that 80 percent of lumps are benign, or not cancerous, according to the National Cancer Institute. What may feel like lumps could actually be cysts, inflamed fibrous tissue, or other common breast anomalies. However, only a doctor can diagnose these conditions and suggest treatment. Benign tumors are rarely life-threatening, can be removed and seldom grow back. Malignant, or cancerous, tumors can often be removed but may grow back, and their cells may invade and damage nearby tissues and organs. Another common misconception is that a lump that is painful to the

touch is benign; unfortunately, pain offers no indication as to whether a lump is cancerous or not. See a doctor immediately if you detect anything out of the ordinary.

**Myth: If you get breast cancer, you will probably die**

**Fact:** This is a major misconception that Ellen Rasnake, Information Service Supervisor at the National Cancer Institute, hopes to clear up. The National Cancer Institute stresses the importance of early detection and awareness when it comes to breast cancer survival, and Rasnake says that, with the proper education and treatment, “breast cancer is a disease that people can live with and survive.”

**Sidebar:**

We can write about breast cancer until our fingers turn blue and our computers overheat, but unfortunately, questions will still remain. Luckily, there’s a plethora of information available online to address questions regarding how to cope with your diagnosis (or that of a loved one), how to get back to life after cancer, where to find support groups or the countless other questions that you, specifically, have. Whether you’re living with breast cancer, know someone who is, or simply want to find out more about the topic, here’s a list of websites to try.

**National Cancer Institute**

[www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov)

**American Cancer Society**

[www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)

**National Breast Cancer Foundation**

[www.nationalbreastcancer.org](http://www.nationalbreastcancer.org)

**American Breast Cancer Foundation**

[www.abcf.org](http://www.abcf.org)

**Breast Cancer Action**

[www.bcaction.org](http://www.bcaction.org)

**Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation**

[www.komen.org](http://www.komen.org)

**Gilda’s Club**

[www.gildasclub.org](http://www.gildasclub.org)