Breast Cancer Awareness Month: American Cancer Society Survey Reveals Significant Gaps Between Awareness and Action for Modifiable Cancer Risk Factors

Understanding what affects breast cancer risk can empower women to take charge of their health with everyday choices that help reduce risk

ATLANTA, Oct. 1, 2026 — The American Cancer Society today released the findings of a survey of approximately 33,000 U.S. women, assessing awareness of modifiable breast cancer risk factors and whether women are meeting American Cancer Society recommendations for risk reduction and prevention. The survey found risk-factor awareness is generally high but that significant gaps exist between awareness and taking positive action to lower risk.

Some breast cancer risk factors are within our influence, and awareness can be a powerful starting point for action. In fact, it's estimated that more than 30% of breast cancers are considered preventable through healthy behaviors that can reduce risk, including exercising regularly, maintaining a healthy weight, avoiding alcohol and tobacco, and breastfeeding.

"Knowing your risk factors isn't the same as acting on them, and this gap is the real story here," said Alpa V. Patel, PhD, senior vice president of population science at the American Cancer Society. "It's not enough to raise awareness — we have to understand whether awareness translates into action, and how we can help women close the distance."

The survey's key findings include:

- **Women already know what they can't control.** 99% are aware that a family history of cancer raises risk, but it's also important to know that family history alone doesn't predict most breast cancer cases. More than 85% of women diagnosed with breast cancer have no family history of the disease.
- **Physical activity shows the widest gap.** 91% of women know that low activity levels raise cancer risk, yet only 27% meet the American Cancer Society's recommended 150 to 300 minutes of moderate-intensity activity (or 75 to 150 minutes of vigorous-intensity activity) each week.
- **Alcohol shows the second-largest gap.** 85% of women know that alcohol use raises risk, but 69% report drinking to some extent.
- **Breastfeeding (for women who have children and can breastfeed) is the least-known protective factor**. Only 55% of women know that breastfeeding can help lower cancer risk.

In addition to a family history of breast cancer, other risk factors that you cannot change include being born female, age (most breast cancers are found in women aged 55 and older), race and ethnicity, inherited genetic changes, dense breast tissue, and prior radiation to the chest area.

The American Cancer Society encourages women to take the ACS CancerRisk360™ free assessment to learn more about the factors they *can* change to improve their health and lower their cancer risk.

The survey highlights substantial opportunities to improve awareness of modifiable risk factors for breast cancer and to encourage women to make informed choices that can lower their risk. These findings can strengthen public health awareness efforts as well as guide conversations between healthcare providers and their patients. The survey results also highlight the importance of initiatives to expand access to safe, walkable communities and affordable, healthy food.

The 33,000 survey respondents were drawn from the American Cancer Society's Cancer Prevention Study-3 (CPS-3), a large, geographically and racially/ethnically diverse sample of 300,000 participants who were cancer free when they enrolled between 2006 and 2013 and who continue to be studied. Likely because of respondents' long-term engagement with cancer research, their awareness levels for cancer risk factors are significantly higher than those demonstrated by the general population in previous studies.

Breast cancer is the most common cancer in women in the U.S. after skin cancers, accounting for about 1 in 3 new cancer cases in women each year. About 1 in 8 women in the U.S. will develop breast cancer during their lifetime, and the incidence rate is rising 1% per year overall and at a faster rate (1.4%) for women aged under 50. In 2026, an estimated 321,910 new cases of invasive female breast cancer will be diagnosed in the U.S. and 42,140 women will die from the disease. In the same period, an estimated 2,670 men will be diagnosed with invasive breast cancer and 530 men will die from the disease.

Read the full survey report, “From Awareness to Action: A New Look at Breast Cancer Risk Reduction,” here.

Additional American Cancer Society Resources:

- Media Resources: Breast Cancer Awareness Month
- Breast Cancer Awareness Month Resources Page
- Breast Cancer Information
- Breast Cancer Screening Recommendations
- 2026 Cancer Facts & Figures
- Patient Lodging Programs
- Road To Recovery® Free Rides Program

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About the American Cancer Society
The American Cancer Society is a leading cancer-fighting organization with a vision to end cancer as we know it, for everyone. For more than 110 years, we have been improving the lives of people with cancer and their families as the only organization combating cancer through advocacy, research, and patient support. We are committed to ensuring everyone has an opportunity to prevent, detect, treat, and survive cancer. To learn more, visit cancer.org or call our helpline at 1-800-227-2345. Connect with us on Facebook, X, and Instagram.

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