

BREAST CANCER WITH ALL THE SCARE STORIES IN THE MEDIA, IT CAN BE HARD TO KNOW WHAT IS A REAL RISK, SAYS LISA SCOTT

Keep abreast of threats

If every woman believed what she read about breast cancer she would live in a permanent state of fear. But a recent University of London report has confirmed that previous concerns about chemicals in cosmetics and pesticides may be true. Here we look at what lifestyle choices may increase your risk of developing the disease.

Picture: photolibary.com



BRAS

Says who? OK, so the wrong bra can feel like an instrument of torture – but could it really be a cancer risk? American medical anthropologist Sydney Ross Singer released a report in 2000 saying that the length of time a woman wears a bra is associated with the risk of developing breast cancer. Singer claims the bra impairs circulation of the lymphatic system. 'The bra compresses the tiny lymphatic vessels that drain the breast of lymph fluid, essentially causing lymphedema of the breast. Over time, this leads to breast pain, fluid-filled cysts, tissue degeneration and, ultimately, cancer, since impaired lymphatics cannot effectively eliminate cancer-causing toxins from the tissue.'

Risk factor: Singer still stands by his initial investigation. He explains that he has been conducting an ongoing project in which 'women are agreeing to go bra-free to see if they have lower rates of fibrocystic breast disease and breast cancer'. So far, he claims, the women's reports support his theories.

Dr Kat Arney, senior science information officer at Cancer Research UK, says there is a lack of evidence. 'Constriction or applying pressure to an area of the body does not make normal cells become cancerous. For your bra to have any effect on your lymphatic system, it would have to be painfully and unbearably tight.'

ABORTION

Says who? The theory states that cells in the breast develop and change during pregnancy and that this process is disrupted by abortion. Professor Joel Brind, from the City University of New York, released a report in 2000 saying an abortion could increase the chance of developing cancer by as much as 30 per cent. His work was funded by the anti-abortion charity Life.

Risk factor: The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists undertook a study of papers published since 2004 and says there is no link between the two.

DIET

Says who? The Harvard Medical School monitored 90,000 women for more than a decade and found that those who ate a high meat diet were far more prone to developing the hormonally reactive breast cancer.

Risk factor: Gareth Evans, professor of medical genetics at St Mary's Hospital in Manchester, says red meat is a high risk factor. 'Instead, opt for chicken and fish and eat lots of fruit and vegetables, which are rich in antioxidants.'

Being overweight is a big risk factor, so keep your calorie consumption down. There have been many conflicting claims about dairy; some think it increases the risk while others say it protects. Evans says it is fine to consume but stick to low-fat options. Soya is another grey area. 'It has been thought in the past

that it may protect against breast cancer but people shouldn't eat it on that basis. It's still uncertain,' says Evans.

Alcohol does increase the risk so stick to no more than two units per day. There have also been mixed

results about smoking but with some studies claiming that even passive smoking increases the risk by up to 90 per cent, it's not worth lighting up.

For more info on diet: www.genesisuk.org



CHEMICALS



Says who? Toxicology expert Professor Kortenkamp, who led the University of London report, says that cases of the disease can only be reduced by removing hormone-disrupting man-made chemicals from a range of household products.

Risk factor: Claire Dimmer, chair of Breast Cancer UK, is just as concerned: 'Fewer than 50 per cent of breast cancer cases are attributable to the acknowledged risk factors such as late menopause, obesity and drinking. We argue that carcinogens and endocrine-disrupting chemicals (EDCs) in our environment make up the other 50 per cent.'

It is widely accepted that natural oestrogens in the body increase the risk of breast cancer. Dimmer argues that synthetic chemicals in the environment mimic the actions of oestrogen. 'The carcinogens and EDCs can be found in pesticides, fuels, plastics, detergents, tobacco smoke, prescription drugs, food additives, cosmetics and toiletries,' Dimmer explains. 'Although it is possible for women to choose to avoid some chemicals, ones approved by government for use in such things as prescription drugs are more difficult to avoid.' For more info on carcinogens: www.nomorebreastcancer.org.uk/common_carcinogens.html

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