



DEPARTMENT OF **PUBLIC HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES**

October 2025 Nutrition Article **Breast Cancer Awareness Month**

Breast Cancer Awareness Month is an annual health campaign organized by major breast cancer charities every October to increase awareness of the disease and raise funds for research into its cause, prevention, diagnosis, treatment, and cure. The annual campaign is not only observed in the United States but also internationally, with a variety of events organized, including walks, runs, and other events.

Established in 1985 as a collaborative effort among the American Academy of Family Physicians, AstraZeneca Healthcare Foundation, CancerCare, Inc., and various other sponsors, National Breast Cancer Awareness Month aims to raise awareness and secure funding for breast cancer research. Understanding how the disease affects aging Americans is important because the prevention, treatment, and management of the disease differ and are more intensive in this population.

Breast Cancer in Older Adults

Breast cancer, like most cancers, is a disease of aging. According to the latest statistics from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the median age of a breast cancer diagnosis is 63, and nearly 20% of women diagnosed are over the age of 75. Women in their 70s have the highest risk of breast cancer diagnosis, and women in their 80s have the highest risk of death. Of the more than 42,000 who die from the disease each year, more than half are over 70.

Although breast cancer stats and facts focus primarily on women who get the disease, men are also at risk, but it's about 100 times less common among men than women. American women have a 12% lifetime risk of being diagnosed with breast cancer, making it the second most common cancer in women.

Older age increases the risk of several types of cancer, but advancements in diagnosis and treatment have improved recovery rates for older patients; however, ongoing research is needed to improve care and outcomes. Screening mammography has demonstrated efficacy in decreasing mortality from breast cancer in older adults. Most major organizations, however, don't include older women in the recommendations for breast cancer screenings. Hence, older adults need to promote their own health and inquire about their risk.

Fighting Inflammation at Any Age

With so many factors to consider, it can be easiest to understand our own risks by understanding the connection between inflammation and disease, especially cancer, including breast cancer. Inflammation is your body's natural response to injuries and invaders, a built-in defense system of infection-fighting cells and proteins that warn other cells of invaders, fight invaders off when they arrive, and heal any damage from the resulting conflict.

Inflammation is essential to our survival – you've witnessed this when you've cut yourself, sprained your ankle, or been stung by a bee. Redness and heat are the most basic forms of inflammatory processes. But acute inflammation differs from chronic inflammation, which is a persistent, low-grade response that keeps the body in fight-or-flight mode. Chronic inflammation is primarily associated with unhealthy lifestyles, including poor diet, excessive alcohol, sedentary behavior, unmanaged stress, and obesity. It's recognized as the root cause of many diseases, weakening the immune system and increasing vulnerability to cancers like breast cancer. Tumor-promoting inflammation is a hallmark of cancer, indicating that chronic inflammation plays a significant role in its development.

Use Food as Medicine

Healthy eating is not only important for preventing chronic disease, including cancer, but it can also help patients feel their best and manage any treatments associated with breast cancer. According to a growing number of research studies, nutrition is used as an intervention. The idea of “food is medicine” emphasizes that what we eat significantly impacts our health because food is essential to life. The key principles of Food as Medicine include focusing on whole foods, incorporating a variety of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and quality proteins, personalizing it based on likes/dislikes, and establishing and practicing a feeding schedule despite any lack of hunger signals.

Importance of Strength Training

Staying active as you age is crucial for maintaining physical, emotional and cognitive wellness. Regular physical activity – regardless of duration or intensity – helps to manage and reduce the risk of cancers like breast cancer.

Strength training is crucial for older adults for several reasons. It is a vital component of cancer treatment and recovery, helping preserve muscle mass, combat fatigue, improve bone health, and enhance overall physical and mental well-being. For older adults managing cancer treatments, the importance of maintaining muscle mass ensures functional independence, since treatments lead to significant muscle loss due to hypermetabolism.

In addition, fatigue – a common side effect of cancer treatments – can be mitigated through strength training by promoting better circulation, which in turn improves energy levels. Managing the cognitive effects of treatment, i.e., chemo brains, is essential for improving mood and reducing anxiety and depression, and strength training enhances our brain’s functions. Strength training is a holistic approach that supports treatment and recovery from cancer.

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Recipe of the Month:

Cheesy Meatballs

Protein is important for older adults, and the meatballs below can provide a quality snack or fun addition to your favorite pasta sauce.

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 lb. ground beef
- 3 oz cheddar cheese, shredded
- ¼ tsp garlic powder
- ¼ tsp onion powder
- ¼ tsp paprika
- ¼ tsp salt
- ¼ tsp pepper

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Mix all ingredients together.
2. Roll into 16 balls.
3. Place meatballs on a baking sheet.
4. Bake at 400°F for 30 minutes.

