

Let's show we care

The Health Column

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Breast cancer is the most common cancer in Australian women (excluding non-melanoma skin cancer), with one in eight women being diagnosed before the age of 85.

The ongoing battle to find cures for breast and gynaecological cancers, and to support women suffering from them, is highlighted with the Pink Ribbon Day held this month.

The Cancer Council's Pink Ribbon Day helps raise funds to support the many thousands of Australian women affected by breast and gynaecological cancers. The Cancer Council aims to minimise the threat of women's cancers through successful prevention, best treatment, support and world-class cancer research.



Breast and gynaecological cancers unfortunately touch everyone's life in some way, either directly or through the experience of family and friends. The Cancer Council is asking everyone to unite in pink to help them beat women's cancers.

There are a number of risk factors associated with breast cancers, some of which can be modified and some which cannot. Many people have at least one risk factor but will never develop breast cancer, while others with breast cancer may have had no known risk factors.

While the causes of breast cancer are not fully understood, there are a number of factors associated with the risk of developing the disease. Some of the risk factors for breast cancer include:

- being a woman
- increasing age
- having a strong family history of breast cancer
- having a breast condition such as a personal history of breast cancer, ductal carcinoma in situ (DCIS) or lobular carcinoma in situ (LCIS)
- exposure to female hormones (natural and administered)

- obesity (poor diet and inadequate exercise)
- excess alcohol consumption.

The Pink Ribbon Day campaign also aims to raise awareness and support for gynaecological cancers (cancers of the female reproductive system). These forms of cancer are named according to the organ or part of the body where they first develop, including ovary, uterus, cervix, vagina and vulva.

Types of gynaecological cancer include:

- Ovarian cancer—begins in one or both ovaries, a pair of solid, oval-shaped organs producing hormones and eggs (*ova*).
- Uterine cancer—begins in the main body of the uterus, a hollow organ about the size and shape of an upside-down pear. The uterus is where the baby grows when a woman is pregnant.
- Cervical cancer—begins in the cervix, the lower, cylinder-shaped part of the uterus. Its upper margin is connected to the uterus, while its lower margin is connected to the vagina.
- Vaginal cancer—begins in the vagina (also called the birth canal), a muscular tube-like channel that extends from the cervix to the external part of the females sex organs (*vulva*).
- Vulval cancer—begins in the vulva, the outer part of the female reproductive system. It includes the opening of the vagina, the inner and outer lips (also called *labia minora* and *labia majora*), the clitoris and the mons pubis (soft, fatty mound of tissue, above the labia).

The causes of many gynaecological cancers are not fully understood, but there are a number of factors associated with the risk of developing one or more types of gynaecological cancer.

These risk factors include increasing age, having a strong family history, identified gene mutations, reproductive history such as child-bearing and exposure to hormones – produced by the body or taken as medication. Other risk factors can include exposure to diethylstilbestrol (DES) in the womb, viral infection such as human papilloma virus (HPV), and lifestyle factors such as smoking and those leading to excess body weight.

Your local community pharmacy is your health destination, and Self Care Fact Cards such as *Breast awareness and pap smear* are available from pharmacies providing the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia's Self Care health information program.

For the nearest Self Care pharmacy location phone the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia on 1300 369 772, or go to www.psa.org.au/selfcare, then click 'Find a *Self Care pharmacy* near you'.