Managing Risk for Breast Cancer: The Gail Model

Cancer of the breast is the second leading cause of death for women in the United States. One in eight women who live to their full life expectancy will develop breast cancer. When found early, breast cancer can be treated with better outcomes than if found in later stages.

It’s important to know if you are at high risk for breast cancer. If you are, then your doctors can take steps to help reduce your risk of potentially developing breast cancer. One way to find out if you might be at high risk for breast cancer is with the Gail model.

What is the Gail model?
The Gail model is a tool used to assess your risk for breast cancer. We use a computer-based program that looks at your personal and family history to estimate your chance of developing breast cancer. This can be done when you see your provider for a yearly exam, or when you have your yearly mammogram.

The Gail model will calculate your chance of developing breast cancer in the next five years, and in your total lifetime. Your chances are compared to the average woman in your age group, and we then can tell if you are high risk.

What increases my risk of breast cancer?
One or more of the factors below may increase your chances of developing breast cancer:
- Increasing age (the older you are, the more likely you will develop breast cancer)
- When you had your first period
- When you had your first child
- Number of relatives with breast cancer
- Number of breast biopsies you have had
- History of abnormal cells on a breast biopsy
- Use of hormones
- Weight, diet, activity level
- Breast density
- Alcohol intake

What if I am at high risk for breast cancer?
If your Gail model score tells us you are at high risk, we will help you see a provider to give you guidance. This may be your primary care provider, or it might be one of our breast specialists. Your health is important to us, and we look forward to helping you take control of your health.

Can a woman be at increased risk for breast cancer and have a low Gail model score?
Yes, if there is a strong family history of breast and/or ovarian cancer. Some family histories may point to genetic concerns and your doctor may recommend you see a genetic counselor.

The information presented is intended for general information and educational purposes. It is not intended to replace the advice of your health care provider. Contact your health care provider if you believe you have a health problem.