




An Oncologist's Message to Women:

KNOW YOUR RISK FOR BREAST CANCER

Alejandra Perez, M.D.

Whether she's speaking to one woman or a thousand, breast medical oncologist Alejandra Perez, M.D., has one key message.

"I tell women, 'Know your risk, then you can do something about it.' Early intervention could prevent you from becoming a statistic."

Based at NCI-designated Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center, part of the University of Miami Health System in Miami, Florida, Dr. Perez says breast cancer is associated with so many risk factors, women may not realize their level of risk. "An average risk is 10 to 12%. High risk is defined as having more than a 20% lifetime risk of developing breast cancer," Dr. Perez says.

If you have a personal or family history of breast cancer, the BRCA mutation (more common in women of Ashkenazi Jewish or Bahamian

ancestry), or had chest radiation at a young age, you are considered high risk. Smoking, daily alcohol use, obesity, and lack of exercise also make you more prone to the disease. "Lifestyle changes are important. We support patients through nutrition, exercise, and psychology specialists," Dr. Perez says.

Mammograms are the gold standard for breast cancer detection. Traditionally, women begin annual breast cancer screening mammograms at age 40, but this doesn't protect younger women at high risk.

"You may need mammograms earlier or more often. The only way to know is to get a risk assessment. Every woman needs a risk assessment at some point," Dr. Perez says.

The American College of Radiology recommends that women of Ashkenazi Jewish descent and African Americans undergo risk assessment at age 30 to determine their need for enhanced screening.

"The protocol for high-risk patients is alternating mammograms with an MRI every six months," Monica Yepes, M.D., chief of breast imaging at Sylvester, says. "Women who cannot tolerate MRI or prefer not to have MRI may

undergo contrast-enhanced mammography instead. This produces a better picture of the breast." Dr. Yepes, a board-certified, fellowship-trained breast radiologist, encourages women to ask who reads their mammogram results. "At most free-standing imaging centers, radiologists read images of the entire body. You want a radiologist who specializes in breast imaging to read your mammogram."

When you want to beat the odds of your high-risk profile, you need every advantage. Dr. Perez urges women to choose a cancer center like Sylvester, with National Cancer Institute designation. "To achieve and maintain NCI designation, we have to pass a very rigorous examination, which demonstrates our level of expertise. NCI designation gives us even more access to trials, grants, and an ability to collaborate with other NCI-designated centers around the nation."

For patients, getting care at an NCI-designated cancer center, like Sylvester, means getting care from top cancer specialists and having access to life-changing research trials.

For more information about Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center, visit Sylvester.org.

