In the Pink

It’s National Breast Cancer Awareness Month, a good time to point out that the more you understand your breasts, the healthier you’ll be.

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Sometimes it seems that there are more myths about breasts than there are facts. So here’s where we set a few records straight—and tell you how these truths affect your health.

TRUTH: It's normal to have one breast bigger than the other. As with feet and ears, breasts often grow to a slightly different size or shape. “One in four women have more than a slight difference in breast size and shape. Usually the difference is a half to a full cup size, but it can be up to two cup sizes,” says Dr. Marisa Weiss, an oncologist and founder and president of Breastcancer.org. But remember: “You'll notice it more than anyone else, because you're looking down at them.”

Health Connection Being familiar with each breast’s size and shape lets you discern change. If, as an adult, you have significant changes in the size, shape, or texture of either breast, and it's not related to pregnancy, you need a closer look. Make an appointment with your doctor for a breast exam. “A persistent lump, thickening, dent, dimpling, rash, or bulge could be a warning sign of breast cancer,” Weiss says. “So could new or persistent breast pain, nipple discharge on one side, or a swollen lymph node under your arm. If any of these lasts for more than a week or two, see your doctor.”
TRUTH: You can inherit breast size from your father

“It makes sense that this genetic trait could come from either side of the family,” says certified genetic counselor and researcher John M. Quillin, Ph.D., an assistant professor in the Department of Human and Molecular Genetics at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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That means you can inherit breast cancer risk from your dad too. Women overestimate their mother’s family history and underestimate their father’s impact on their relative risk. In a recent study, Quillin found that women were aware of 60 percent more breast cancers on their mother’s side than on their father’s—a reflection of a knowledge gap about Dad’s female relatives. “It’s important to know about both sides of your family,” Quillin says.

TRUTH: Nursing won’t flatten them

That’s the conclusion of University of Kentucky plastic surgeons who studied the breast shape of 132 women who wanted breast lift surgery. While nursing may thin them out, certain other things definitely will: pregnancy, long-term smoking, and aging.

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You shouldn’t let myths keep you from nursing. Its effects are almost entirely positive. “Breastfeeding protects by lowering your body’s levels of estrogen. Estrogen can fuel the growth of some forms of breast cancer,” Weiss says. In one study of 2,616 women, those who breast-fed for six months or more lowered their odds for a rare, aggressive type called triple-negative breast cancer by 50 percent and of some other breast cancers by 20 percent.

Jessica never would have guessed popcorn this good could be 94% fat free.

You’ll have to try it to believe it.
TRUTH: You need a GOOD sports bra. Researchers at Britain's Portsmouth University say that without adequate support, your breasts may bounce 3½ inches with every step you take during exercise—putting extra stress on key support structures called Cooper's ligaments. The result: discomfort and sagging. The remedy? A sports bra, which reduces bouncing by 78 percent.

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If you're comfortable when you work out, you'll exercise more frequently, and physical activity is one of the best ways to lower your cancer risk. One recent analysis of 62 studies found it cuts risk up to 30 percent even after menopause, when cancer risk rises. "All of the research on breast cancer and exercise shows that no matter what age you start, it will reduce your risk," says Dr. Christy Russell, associate professor of medicine at the University of Southern California School of Medicine and chairman of the American Cancer Society's Breast Cancer Advisory Committee. "We recommend getting at least 30 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity five or more days of the week. For even more protection, going for 45 to 60 minutes is even better."

about 30 percent
That's the number of women who have dense breasts, making routine mammograms difficult to read. For them, a high-contrast digital mammogram is virtually essential.

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A No-Excuses Guide to Mammograms

The annual test is no fun, but it is essential.

by PATRICIA PRIJATEL photo KATHRYN GAMBLE

WHAT'S NOT TO LIKE about putting your breasts on a cold metal plate and having them squished mercilessly? OK, there's nothing to like—except that it can save your life. "Mammograms are very effective at finding breast cancer early when it has the potential to be most curable," says Dr. Marisa Weiss, president and founder of Breastcancer.org. In an online poll done by her organization for Better Homes and Gardens, 40 percent of respondents said their breast cancer was discovered by mammogram, usually at either stage 1 or 2, when the prognosis is best. Yet 36 percent of the 1,018 women surveyed did not get regular mammograms before they were diagnosed. Why? You may recognize the reasons.

"I'M TOO BUSY."
No excuse The procedure only takes about 15 minutes. Not getting one can take a whole lot more of your time. "There's a big difference between a stage 1 cancer that can be treated with surgery, radiation, and hormone therapy, and a stage 4 that is incurable and requires ongoing treatment," says Dr. Theresa Bevers, medical director of clinical cancer prevention at the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston. "If you want to continue being very busy, you need an annual mammogram."

"IT'S NOT IN MY FAMILY."
No excuse The number of cases due to genetics is actually very much the minority. The biggest risk factors are being a woman and getting older.

"I DO SELF-EXAMS."
No excuse Monthly self-exams are essential, but as part a pattern. "The best approach is an annual digital mammogram, a doctor's exam, and your own self-exam," Weiss says. When you do your self-exams, focus on all changes, not just lumps. If anything looks or feels different, call a doctor.

"I'M TOO YOUNG."
No excuse Even though the American Cancer Society wants to see annual mammograms beginning at age 40, some women should start sooner. Weiss suggests starting younger if you have a family history. Have your first mammogram done 10 years earlier than the age at which the youngest affected family member was diagnosed.

"THEY'RE PAINFUL."
No excuse You can control the discomfort. "An experienced radiology technologist can work with you to do the compression in steps," Weiss says, lessening the sudden pinch that is so uncomfortable to many women. She also suggests asking if the imaging tray can be warmed, as well as scheduling the test for a less sensitive time in your cycle (usually right after your period). Taking pain medication an hour before can help too. Some centers, she says, use a new device that softens the metal with a foam pad. Ask for it.

"I CAN'T AFFORD IT."
No excuse The American Cancer Society or Susan G. Komen for the Cure can help you find a no- or low-cost option. Call the American Cancer Society at 800/227-2345. Visit Komen at komen.org.

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