

From Awareness to Action: A New Look at Breast Cancer Risk Reduction

Overview

Some breast cancer risk factors are within our influence, and awareness can be a powerful starting point for action. In fact, it's estimated that [more than 30%](#) of breast cancers are considered preventable through healthy behaviors that can help reduce risk, including exercising regularly, maintaining a healthy weight, avoiding alcohol and tobacco, and breastfeeding.

While no one can control every risk factor, understanding what affects breast cancer risk can empower women to feel better informed and equipped to take charge of their health with everyday choices that can help reduce their risk.

We surveyed approximately 33,000 U.S. women enrolled in the American Cancer Society's [Cancer Prevention Study-3 \(CPS-3\)](#) to find out what they know about their personal cancer risk and whether they are meeting American Cancer Society recommendations for risk reduction and prevention.

This research can inform educational and awareness campaigns, particularly where opportunities for improvement are the greatest.



"Knowing your risk factors isn't the same as acting on them, and this gap is the real story here. It's not enough to raise awareness — we have to understand whether awareness translates into action, and how we can help women close the distance."

Alpa V. Patel, PhD

Senior Vice President, Population Science
American Cancer Society

The Research

In August, Patel and her colleagues deployed a healthcare engagement-focused survey through the CPS-3 participant portal. They asked participants whether they believe various modifiable factors are related to increasing or decreasing cancer risk or if there is no relationship to cancer. These factors included tobacco, alcohol, exercise, obesity, diet, breastfeeding, and more. As part of participants’ ongoing engagement in CPS-3, they also provide information about these factors, allowing researchers to examine whether knowledge of lifestyle behaviors related to cancer risk is correlated with individuals’ engagement in the behaviors.

The team analyzed responses specific to modifiable and nonmodifiable breast cancer risk factors to understand both awareness levels and the gap between awareness and behavior. The modifiable factors are outlined in this table:

Modifiable Factor	Recommendation
Having excess body weight	Achieve and maintain a healthy weight throughout your life — avoid gaining excess body weight by balancing your food intake with physical activity.
Physical activity	Get at least 150 to 300 minutes of moderate-intensity activity, or 75 to 150 minutes of vigorous-intensity activity, each week (or a combination of both).
Alcohol use	It is best not to drink alcohol. For women who do drink, no more than 1 drink a day is recommended. A drink is 12 ounces of beer, 5 ounces of wine, or 1.5 ounces of 80-proof hard liquor (distilled spirits).
Smoking tobacco	Avoiding smoking, or quitting if you currently smoke, might lower your risk.
Breastfeeding	Breastfeeding for at least several months after childbirth may offer an added benefit of reducing breast cancer risk.

approximately
33,000

U.S. women enrolled in the American Cancer Society’s Cancer Prevention Study-3 (CPS-3)

Key Findings

01 Women already know what they can't control — 99% are aware that family history raises risk. Awareness is nearly universal even though family history alone doesn't predict most breast cancer cases: more than 85% of women diagnosed with breast cancer have no family history of the disease.

02 Physical activity shows the widest gap. 91% of women know that low activity levels raise cancer risk, yet only 27% meet the American Cancer Society's recommended 150 to 300 minutes of moderate-intensity activity (or 75 to 150 minutes of vigorous-intensity activity) each week.

03 Alcohol shows the second-largest gap. 85% of women know alcohol use raises risk, but 69% report drinking to some extent.

04 Breastfeeding (for women who have children and can breastfeed) is the least-known protective factor. Only 55% of women know that breastfeeding can help lower cancer risk — the lowest awareness level of any factor.

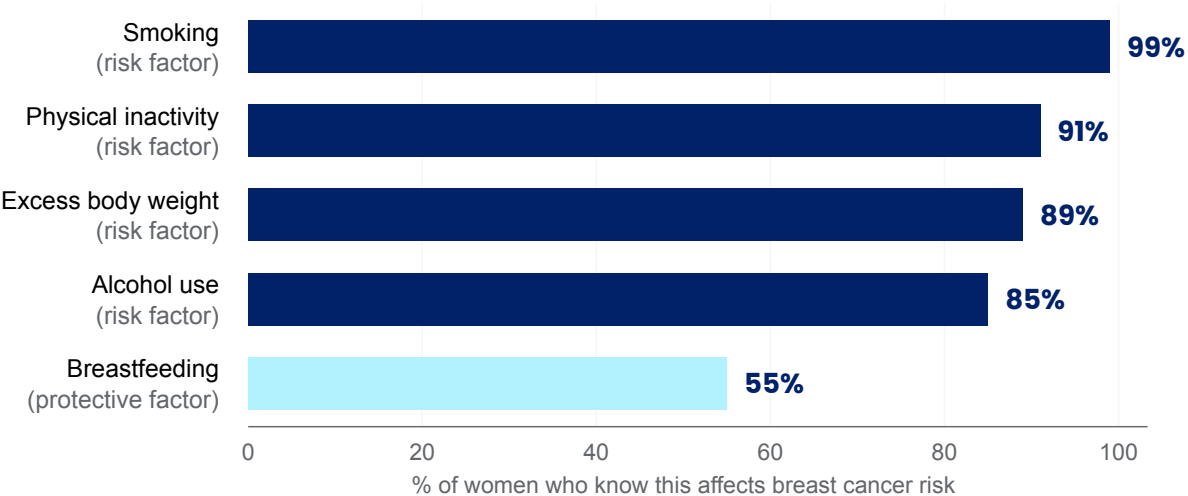
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Awareness of Risk and Protective Factors

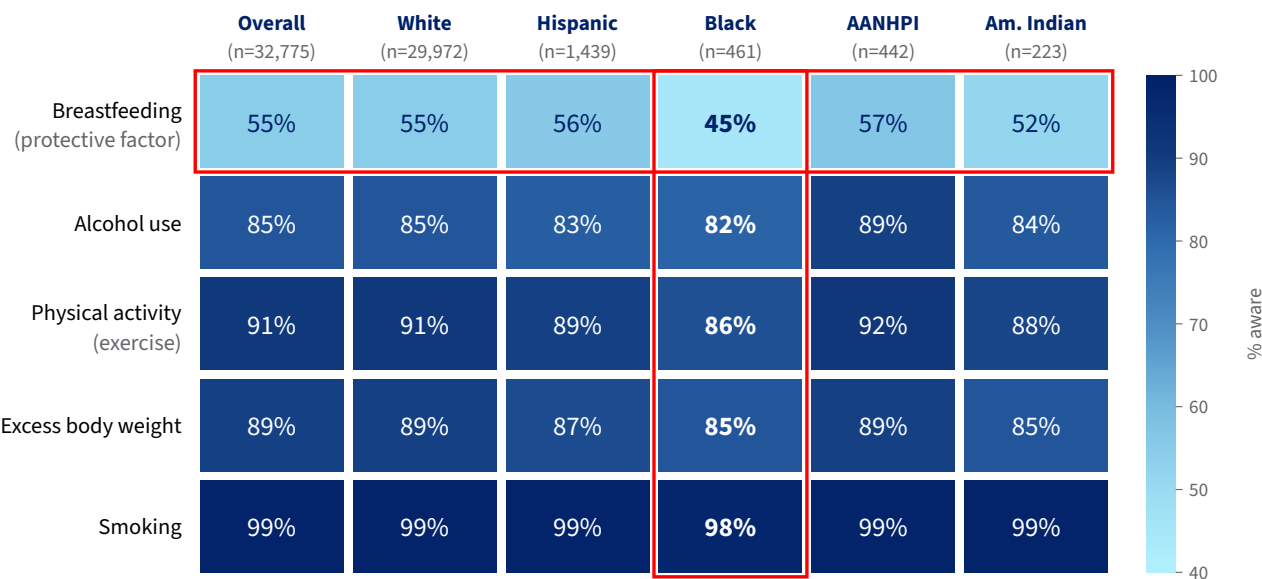
Awareness of family history and smoking as risk factors is nearly universal (both at 99%). Roughly 90% of respondents are aware of the role exercise and maintaining a healthy weight play in reducing cancer risk. Just over half of respondents are aware that breastfeeding may reduce cancer risk, and that number dropped to 45% awareness among Black women (N=461). There were no other significant variations in awareness by race and ethnicity.

Awareness of Breast Cancer Risk & Protective Factors



Awareness of Breast Cancer Risk & Protective Factors, by Race/Ethnicity

Updated Sept. 17, 2026 data. Red outline: the biggest awareness gap (breastfeeding) and the group with the most consistent gaps (Black respondents)



It is worth noting that likely because of the survey respondents’ long-term engagement with cancer research, the group’s awareness levels are significantly higher than those demonstrated by the general population in previous studies.

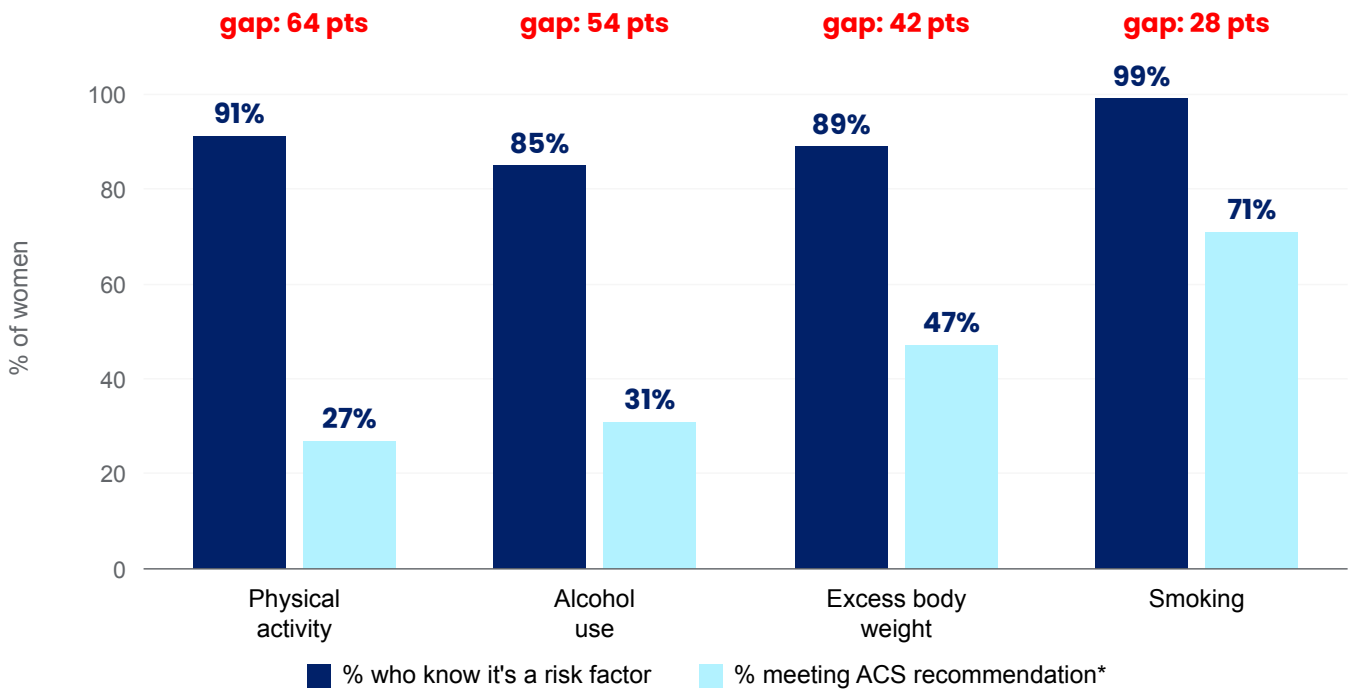
Awareness-vs.-Action Gaps

The largest gaps between awareness and action are related to physical activity and alcohol use.

While 91% of women surveyed know that low levels of physical activity increase cancer risk, just 27% of the same respondents meet the American Cancer Society’s recommendation of 150 to 300 minutes of moderate-intensity activity (or 75 to 150 minutes of vigorous-intensity activity) each week.

Alcohol use shows the second-widest gap in the survey, with 85% of women knowing alcohol, a carcinogen, increases cancer risk. However, 69% report drinking to some extent.

Awareness vs. Action: The Gap by Risk Factor



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report drinking to some extent

Why This Matters

Breast cancer incidence is [rising 1% per](#) year overall and at a faster rate (1.4%) for women under age 50. This is probably due to younger women being more likely to have certain factors that increase risk, such as having excess body weight, having fewer children, or having a first child after age 30.

Women can play a meaningful role in changing this trajectory, while reducing their personal risk and improving their overall health, as more than 30% of all breast cancers are linked to risk factors people can change.

This survey demonstrates that there are opportunities to improve awareness and deepen understanding of what affects cancer risk. The findings have implications for public health awareness efforts as well as conversations between healthcare providers and their patients. The results also highlight the importance of initiatives to expand access to safe, walkable communities and affordable, healthy food.

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About the American Cancer Society Cancer Prevention Study-3 (CPS-3)

Cancer Prevention Study-3 (CPS-3) is a nationwide, longitudinal population study of ~300,000 U.S. adults. At enrollment (2006-2013), participants were aged 30-65 years and cancer-free. Participants are followed over time for the occurrence of cancer and other health outcomes and resurveyed minimally every 3 years. A large subpopulation of participants (~70,000) have opted into a secure participant portal and complete up to three additional brief surveys or other study-related tasks annually.

About the American Cancer Society

The American Cancer Society is a leading cancer-fighting organization with a vision to end cancer as we know it, for everyone. For more than 110 years, we have been improving the lives of people with cancer and their families as the only organization combating cancer through advocacy, research, and patient support. We are committed to ensuring everyone has an opportunity to prevent, detect, treat, and survive cancer. To learn more, visit cancer.org or call our helpline at 1-800-227-2345. Connect with us on [Facebook](#), [X](#), and [Instagram](#).