

Understanding Breast Self-Exams

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Breast cancer is a malignant (cancerous) tumor that develops from cells in the breast. Regular, thorough breast examinations and radiology screenings can help detect breast changes early and may prevent death from breast cancer. Women should become familiar with the appearance and feel of their breasts and report any changes to their doctor as soon as possible.

Breast Health Screening

- Examine your breasts each month (see Breast Self-Exams) for any lumps or abnormalities. The person who should know the geography of your breast best is you.
- Visit your gynecologist every year. During your visit, the doctor or a nurse practitioner will perform a clinical breast exam to check for changes and abnormalities.
- Starting at age 40, get a mammogram (X-ray picture) every year. Digital mammography provides a clearer, more accurate image of the breast.

Breast Self-Exams

- Pick the same day each month to do the exam. Premenopausal women should do the exam toward the end of their menstrual period. Postmenopausal women can pick any day of the month (the 1st, the 15th, etc.).
- With your arms at your side, look at your breasts in a mirror. Make sure they are their usual size, shape, texture and color and have no obvious swelling.
- Repeat this visual check with your arms raised over your head and with your hands on your hips.
- Squeeze each nipple to make sure there is no discharge.
- Lie down on a bed or couch. Raise your right hand over your head. Use your left hand to examine your right breast. With the pads of the three middle fingers, use a firm, smooth touch to make small, dime-sized circular motions up and down the breast tissue. Cover every part of the breast and

your underarm. Feel for any lumps, bumps or thickened skin.

- Repeat by placing your left arm over your head and using your right hand to examine the left breast.
- Repeat while standing or sitting.

Non-cancerous breast exam findings

There are a number of benign (noncancerous) breast problems that could be identified by an exam. If you notice anything unusual, contact your doctor.

Fibrocystic breast tissue: a common condition meaning the breasts have denser tissue and that “lumps and bumps” are common to the feel of the breasts.

Fibroadenoma: a solid, noncancerous tumor common in young women that can increase in size during pregnancy and breastfeeding. Many fibroadenomas stop growing or shrink over time.

Cyst: a harmless fluid-filled sac that can be treated by inserting a small needle to remove fluid and tissue.

Intraductal papillomas: wart-like growths that spread and may involve the milk ducts, causing a bloody discharge; treatment involves surgical removal of the growths and affected parts of the ducts.

Breast exams include feeling for a change in breast tissue and visually inspecting the breast for changes.

When to call a doctor

The most common sign of breast cancer is a new lump or mass in the breast or underarm. It's important to have anything unusual checked by a doctor.

Other signs:

- Swelling of all or part of the breast
- Skin irritation or dimpling
- Breast pain
- Nipple pain or the nipple turning inward
- Redness, scaliness or thickening of the nipple or breast skin
- Nipple discharge other than breast milk
- Changes in the appearance of the nipple or breast that are different than the normal monthly changes a woman experiences

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