
BREAST SELF-EXAM

WHEN TO DO BREAST SELF-EXAM

Breast self-exam should be done once a month, just after the end of a women's menstrual period. This is when the breasts are softest and least lumpy.

After menopause, a women should set herself a calendar date, like the first of each month, to do breast self-exam.

Women who are not menstruating because they are pregnant or nursing will find their breasts more difficult to examine because of breast changes for milk production. However, they should continue to examine their breasts once as month.

STEP 1: EXAMINING YOUR BREASTS

Arms at Sides

Sit or stand in front of your mirror with your arms at your sides. Look for changes in your breast size and shape. Look for any indentation or dimpling of the skin. If you see a change in the texture of the skin, so that the pores are large and open like those of an orange, this is an important sign of breast cancer. Unusual reddening of the skin, rashes on the breast or nipple, or unusually prominent veins should be noted.

Inspect your nipples for any changes in the direction they point, any new inversion (nipple pointing inwards), flattening, broadening, or retraction. Look for thickening, redness or erosion in the skin around the nipple and areola (pigmented skin around the nipple).

Gently squeeze each nipple to see if there is any discharge. If you have a nipple discharge, you should have it checked by a doctor. Although it is usually not caused by breast cancer, it sometimes can be.

Arms Raised

Raise both your arms over your head and look again for the same breast changes.

Hands on Hips

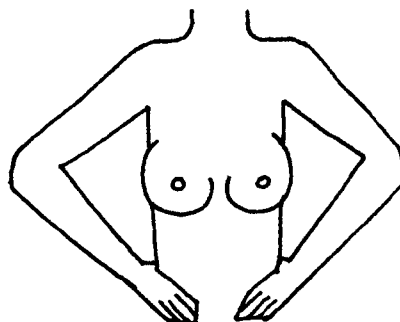
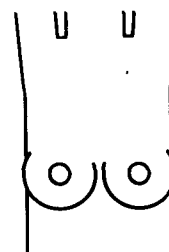
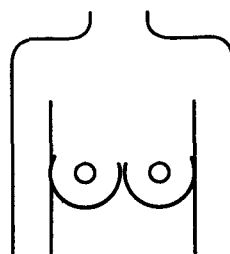
Put your hands on your hips and squeeze against the hips to contract your chest muscles. Look for any difference in the way your 2 breasts respond.

Forward Bending

Bend forward in front of the mirror so your breasts hang down. If one breast has a cancerous tumour which is attached to the chest wall, it will not hang down freely like the other breast.

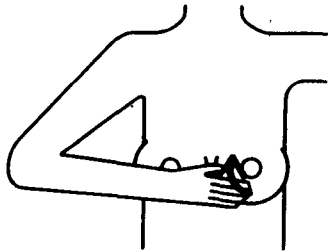
Breast Lifting

Lift your breasts and check for any skin changes on the underside of the breast which is not normally seen.



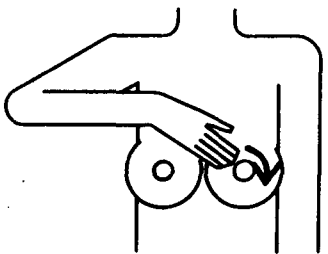
STEP 2: PALPATION: FEELING YOUR BREASTS FOR LUMPS OR THICKENINGS

Lie on your bed, put a pillow or bath towel under your left shoulder, and your left hand under your head. Hold your right hand flat with your fingers together. Press smoothly with small circular motions to feel the breast tissue between your fingers and your chest wall.



Start at the outside of your breast near your armpit and feel slowly and carefully with small circular motions all around the outer part of your breasts. Women with large and heavy breasts may feel a firm ridge of tissue at the lower edge of their breasts. This is a normal part of the breast.

Move your fingers in towards the nipple about 2 cm. and feel all the way around again, with small circular motions. Move in towards the center of the breast and feel around again. This circle around the breast should be repeated until you have covered the entire breast, including the nipple.

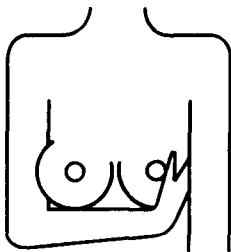


Bring your left arm down to your side and, still using the flat underside of your fingers, feel for lumps or thickenings under your armpit.

Put the pillow under your right shoulder, put your right arm under your head, and repeat the entire procedure for the right breast.

Optional

Repeat the palpation process for both breasts sitting up. This is not always done as part of a regular breast self-exam, but sometimes a lump which is close to the chest wall can be felt sitting up but not lying down.



Remember, when doing breast self exam, especially for the first few times, don't panic if you find what you think are "lumps all over my breasts." Many women's breasts are normally lumpy. Breast tissue, milk ducts, muscles, fibrous tissue, can be very deceiving and appear as a lump to someone not familiar with her breasts. After an exam with a medical practitioner you should know what is normal for you, and continue with regular breast exam every month.

REFERENCES

Canadian Cancer Society, **Breast Self-Examination**, revised March 1983.

Moore, Maureen, "The Diagnosis of Breast Disease — Benign and Malignant", Vancouver, B.C., October 1980.

O'Donnell, Mary et al, **Lesbian Health Matters!**, Santa Cruz Women's Health Collective, 1979.

