

BREAST SELF-EXAM

Breast self-examination is an opportunity for you to regularly survey your breasts and the monthly changes they undergo. Women have more awareness of how their own breasts feel and change than a doctor who does a quick check once a year during a physical exam. By learning about your breasts you can relate any specific concerns or changes to your physician. Most breast lumps are discovered by women themselves, and early detection can allow for more varied treatment alternatives if, in fact, the lump is cancerous. Most lumps are not, but your recognition of this potential concern makes your knowledge important as a member of your health care team.

When To Do Breast Self Exam

Breast self-exam should be done once a month, just after the end of your menstrual period. Because of hormonal changes, this is when the breasts are softest and least lumpy. A monthly interval allows your fingers and eyes an opportunity to distinguish any changes, but is sufficiently frequent to remember how the breast felt before.

After menopause or a hysterectomy, you might want to schedule a monthly date, like the first of each month to do breast self-exam.

If you are not menstruating because you are pregnant or nursing, your breasts may be more difficult to examine. This is due to breast changes for milk

production. However, continue to examine your breasts once a month.

Step 1: Examining Your Breasts

Arms at Sides

Sit or stand in front of a 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 open like that 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 inward), 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 there is nipple discharge, you should have it checked by your physician.

Arms Raised

Raise both of your arms over your head and look again for the same changes in nipple and breast texture.

***H**ands On Hips*

Put your hands on your hips, and squeeze against the hips to contract your chest muscles. Visible changes like dimpling, swelling or puckering will be more apparent. Turn sideways to observe sides of breasts and underarm breast tissue.

***F**orward Bending*

Bend forward in front of the mirror so your breasts hang down. You can see the size of your breasts and if they hang symmetrically. A breast with a cancerous tumour which is attached to the chest wall, may not hang down freely like the other breast and may pull back toward the ribs.

***B**reast Lifting*

Lift your breasts and check for any skin changes on the underside of the breast which is not normally seen. These changes would include redness, puckering or dimpling.

Step 2: Palpitation Feeling Your Breasts For Lumps Or Thickenings

Breast examination is easiest when lying flat on your back. This position supports and spreads the breast evenly so that all breast tissue can be felt. Larger breasted women may wish to put a pillow or bath towel under their shoulder to prevent breast tissue bulging to the side. Women with heavy or large breasts may feel a firm ridge of tissue at the lower edge of their breasts. This is the inframmary ridge. It develops because

we walk upright and our breasts fold over themselves.

- ★ Place your left arm behind your head and place your right hand with fingers together, flat against your left breast. 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. Use the pads of your fingers rather than your fingertips.
- ★ Move your fingers in towards the nipple about 2 cm. or 1/2 finger width and feel all the way around again, with small circular motions. Continue to move in towards the centre 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 halfway down to your side and, still using the pads 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 palpitation process for both breasts sitting upright. 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.

When you begin doing breast self-exam, you may find what feels like lumps all over your breasts. Many women's

breasts are normally lumpy. Breast tissue, milk ducts, muscles and fibrous tissue, can all be very deceiving and appear as a lump to someone not familiar with her breasts. A health practitioner can help you get an idea of what is normal for you, especially one with an understanding of breast examination. Breast clinics may have additional resources like videos and books as well as trained staff to assist you.

It takes time to learn the techniques and discover how your breasts naturally feel and change. Make monthly breast self-exam part of your self care routine.