

Being Breast Aware

A step-by-step guide to breast awareness

'Women in the UK have a 1 in 8 (12.5%) lifetime risk of developing breast cancer'

What does this mean?

When talking of a lifetime risk of developing breast cancer, it can be confusing. It is important to put the individual's level of risk into perspective, because many women over-estimate their risk.

The following figures are from Cancer Research UK (2008)

Risk up to age 29	1 in 2,000
Risk up to age 39	1 in 215
Risk up to age 49	1 in 50
Risk up to age 59	1 in 22
Risk up to age 69	1 in 13
Lifetime risk (all ages)	1 in 8

These data represent the overall estimated risk for all women at these ages and include those with a family history of breast cancer.

What can we do to combat the risk?

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A really useful way of helping ourselves is to become 'breast aware.' Being breast aware acts as an early method of personal screening. Troublesome lumps found when they are small are normally easier to treat. The purpose of this booklet is to show you various ways in which you can check your breasts, bearing in mind that the breast is often naturally lumpy, as a result of normal glandular or hormonal changes. Using the techniques illustrated will help you to pick up any changes you hadn't noticed before and report them to your GP.

It's worth remembering that although 9 out of 10 breast lumps are not cancerous, they should still be investigated. Women can develop various breast problems from time to time and even benign (non-cancerous) conditions may need medical attention.

However, if breast cancer is present, experts agree that earlier diagnosis may allow you a wider range of modern treatment options and might also improve the chances of a complete recovery.

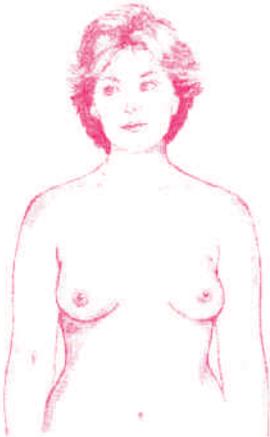
Why Breast Awareness?

About 80% of breast lumps are found by women themselves. Therefore being breast aware, getting to know your healthy body, becoming familiar with what is normal for you and then being able to recognise and report to your GP any changes that might occur, is very important.

Modern experts agree that it is best to check your breasts at different times of the month and not to stick to a rigid routine. In that way, you become familiar with how they look and feel at all times. Once you learn to recognise whatever changes occur normally, you need only check your breasts now and again - about every couple of months, to no particular schedule.

Getting to know your Breasts

Here's how it's done



Looking for change

Undress to the waist and stand in front of the mirror in a good light. Inspect both breasts carefully, from front and side view.

Looking first at your skin, ask yourself

- Is there any dimpling or puckering of the breast or the areola (the disk of breast skin around the nipple)?
- Is there any scaliness, rash, inflammation or discolouration of the skin? Is the nipple pulled in or distorted?
- Is there any discharge from the nipple?
- Is there swelling of the upper arm or armpit?

If the answer is 'yes' to any of these questions, make an early appointment to see your GP. It may be a warning that something is wrong - but that does not necessarily mean serious.

Next, take a look at your shape

Are your breasts normally symmetrical or is one larger than the other? Remember, for some people it is quite normal for one breast to be larger or placed higher than the other, just as some people have non-matching ears, or even different coloured eyes.

Try the following two movements which are designed to show any changes in the shape of your breasts:

Watching closely in the mirror, clasp your hands behind your head, pressing your hands forward.

Then, with hands pressed firmly on your hips, bow slightly towards your mirror as you pull your shoulders and elbows forward. Each time as you feel the muscles tighten, observe the shape of each breast. Once you are familiar with what is normal for you, you will easily be able to notice any future changes that may occur.



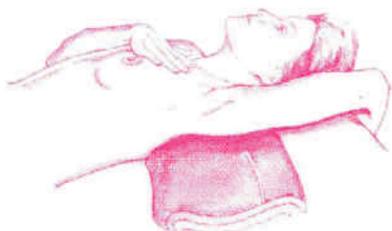
Feeling for change



The easiest way to examine your breasts is in the shower, or sitting up in the bath. Fingers glide easily over soapy skin, making it easier to concentrate on the texture of the underlying tissue. So, put aside the sponge, raise your left arm and use three or four fingers of your right hand to explore your left breast firmly. Use the flat of the fingers (not the tips), keeping them close together.

Beginning at the collarbone above your breast, trace a continuous spiral around your breast, moving your fingers slowly in small circles. Gradually work inwards towards the nipple. Pay special attention to the area between the breast and the armpit, including the armpit itself. Repeat on the right breast.

Alternatively, you might prefer to do this lying flat on your back with a folded towel under your left shoulder, your left arm lifted above your head. This position flattens the breast and makes it easier to examine. With the flattened fingers of the right hand, examine the left breast using exactly the same circular motion described earlier.



Repeat on right breast.

Feeling for change

-
- Did you feel any unusual lump or bulge in either breast or armpit?
 - Did you feel a lumpy area or thickening of skin or underlying tissue?
 - Were there any enlarged glands in either armpit or swelling in the upper arm?
 - Do you experience any discomfort or pain in either breast, other than the normal pre-menstrual soreness?

If you think you have found anything abnormal

- Check the same place in the other breast. It may be just the normal structure of your breast.
- If you still think there's something wrong, mark the place gently with a felt-tip pen and make an early appointment to see your GP.

Most lumps are not cancerous but it's far better to see your doctor and reassure yourself, rather than risk neglecting something that might be serious. Never imagine that you are making an unnecessary fuss.

The whole point of breast awareness is to know how your body normally looks and feels and no-one knows better about this than you.

*P.S.
Have you
had your
smear test?*

Rarely, a GP or nurse may be dismissive of a woman's concerns, or may suggest that she returns in several weeks or months, if the lump or abnormal area still persists. It is unsafe to accept this advice and you are entitled to insist on an urgent second opinion. It is better to be safe than sorry and never worth risking a delay which might prove to be dangerous.

The GP will either be able to reassure you that all is well, or may perhaps decide to refer you for a specialist opinion. In that case, you will be given a hospital appointment to see a breast consultant who will carry out a thorough examination. This may include a mammogram (a special x-ray of the breast) or another kind of breast imaging, as appropriate to you.

Currently, for all women aged between 50 and 70, when the level of risk becomes significantly higher, routine screening is available at your local Breast Screening Centre. Women over 70 may request screening to continue beyond the current age limit. Screening saves lives and we encourage women to take advantage of this opportunity under the UK Breast Screening Programme.

About Cancerkin

Founded in 1987, Cancerkin was the first hospital-based breast cancer charity of its kind in the UK, concerned with treatment, care, education and research, working beyond the scope of the NHS. Our services to patients and those close to them are available free of charge, regardless of where they are being treated. Currently, these include:

One-to-One emotional support

Group support

A range of complementary therapies, including massage, acupuncture and reflexology

A range of group therapy classes, including yoga, pilates and tai chi

Treatment for breast cancer related lymphoedema (by hospital specialist referral)

Information, publications and lectures

Education and training

The Look Good...Feel Better programme

Cancerkin is also currently supporting and collaborating in research into the use of the 'Intrabeam' portable radiotherapy machine in breast cancer patients, and into the efficacy of breast cancer related lymphoedema treatment.

We rely on voluntary support for our work. Donations and sponsorship are always gratefully received. To find out more about making a donation, please visit www.cancerkin.org.uk

Other useful breast cancer contacts

Breast Cancer Haven (London)

Effie Road, London SW6 1TB

Tel: 020 7384 0099

www.thehaven.org.uk

Maggie's Centre (London)

Charing Cross Hospital,

Fulham Palace Road,

London W6 8RF

Tel: 020 7386 1750

www.maggiescentres.org.uk

Breast Cancer Care

5-13 Great Suffolk Street,
Southwark, London SE1 0NS

Tel: 0808 800 6000

www.breastcancercare.org.uk

Macmillan Cancer support

89 Albert Embankment,

London SE1 7UG

Tel: 0808 808 00 00

www.macmillan.org.uk

Breakthrough Breast Cancer

Weston House,

246 High Holborn,

London WC1V 7EX

Tel: 020 7025 2400

www.breakthrough.org.uk

www.cancerkin.org.uk

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