6 Signs of Breast Cancer You Should Be Aware Of

by ALISON RICHARDS

Breast Cancer Symptoms

Breast cancer affects both women and men of all ages, so it's vital to know what the symptoms are so you can seek medical help if you suspect anything is wrong. Many symptoms may not be cancer, but it's still important to see a doctor. Early detection is key in treating breast cancer symptoms.

In my case, I felt a lump which is probably the most well-known symptom of breast cancer. However, there are many other breast cancer symptoms that may point to something nasty that could be lurking inside you, and these may be less familiar so it's important to share the knowledge. If caught early, breast cancer treatment can be started as soon as possible and a successful recovery is more likely.

The most important thing is to get to know your breasts, and how they look or feel. You will then notice changes, however subtle, which could be early signs of cancer.

Many of the breast cancer symptoms listed below can also be innocent as most lumps are benign cysts, and pain can be caused by many other factors. Only a doctor can tell the difference between something insignificant and something serious, so do seek medical advice if you experience any of the signs of breast cancer mentioned below.

Lump

The most well-known symptom of breast cancer is a lump, which can be anywhere in the breast or armpit, and can be as small as a pea or much larger in size. It could be smooth or bumpy, hard or soft, painful or completely painless. Some lumps move around as you feel them and some are tethered to other tissue. Sometimes it's simply just a thickening of the breast tissue or an area where the tissue feels abnormal.

If the cancer has spread to the lymph nodes under the armpit then they too may feel lumpy, or you could experience a swollen arm or hand which is known as lymphoedema. You could also experience these symptoms around your collar bone or breast bone.

When I received my own diagnosis, my surgeon found a number of areas in both breasts which were suspicious but most were, in fact, benign. It was only using an ultrasound scan that the lumps could be examined further and most could be ruled out as being nothing to worry about.

Breast Size or Shape Changes

If your breast changes size or shape then this can be an indicator of breast cancer. It is extremely normal for one breast to be bigger than the other, so it's important to get to know your breasts so that you notice any changes to their size or shape over time.

Pain

Although breast soreness can be a warning sign for cancer, it is also often associated with normal hormonal changes which you may experience during your monthly cycle, the menopause or pregnancy. Breast discomfort can also be caused by an abscess or mastitis but if the pain doesn't subside after taking paracetamol or ibuprofen then you should seek medical help to rule out anything sinister. Any aches or pains which are unexplained need to be followed up.

Skin Changes

If the skin around the breast or nipple changes over time then it can be a sign of breast cancer. These changes may include redness, a red or purple rash, or a puckering or dimpling of the skin where it resembles the outside of an orange or areas which look bruised.

Sometimes, breast cancer can present itself as a peeling or flaking of the skin, but again this could have a perfectly innocent explanation such as eczema or other skin conditions. Another change to the norm could be if you experience itchy areas of skin.

Nipple Changes

Changes to your nipples must also be reported to a doctor, such as if you experience discharge, a change in the position of the nipple or if it becomes inverted or turned in. If the shape of the nipple changes or it looks different in any way then it needs to be investigated.

Warm Skin

Some types of breast cancer present themselves as a localized inflammation, so your skin will feel warm or hot. It usually affects just one breast and the increase in temperature is your body's natural reaction to an abnormal situation within, such as cancer cells.

When to Report Any Breast Changes to a Doctor

Having spoken to many women since my own breast cancer diagnosis, each of whom experienced different breast cancer symptoms, the common thread is that all noticed changes in their bodies and reported them to a doctor.

If you're not sure how to perform a breast self-examination, then there are many YouTube videos which explain the process, which is very quick and can be incorporated into your daily routine such as when you shower. You could also recruit your partner to help by letting you know if they notice any changes to your breasts!

We lead such busy lives that often we neglect to check ourselves regularly. My tip is to use technology such as your phone to set a monthly reminder, or a regular diary event in your Google calendar. If you have a smart device such as an Echo which uses a virtual personal assistant like Alexa then you can set up a regular reminder without even needing to type anything in. Just ask, and she will obey!