7 Abnormalities in Breast Exams

by ALISON RICHARDS

Breast Examination: What Does a Breast Cancer Lump Feel Like?

What does a breast lump feel like? This can be found through self examination. This is a regular check for women of all ages to help detect the early signs of breast cancer. It is important to know how your breasts look and feel normally, so that you can detect any changes early.

If you are a menstruating woman your breasts can change throughout your cycle. Your breasts may become larger, heavier, lumpier and sore before a period. Ideally, you should do your breast self examination a few days after a period, but also make a mental note of what they are like just before and during a period. You need to know what is normal for you.

If you are post-menopausal or no longer have periods, choose any day in the month. I like to use the first day of the month as someone always comments that it is the first of the month, so it is an easy date to remember. Or maybe you would prefer the last Friday in the month if that coincides with payday from work. You might like to set a reminder on the calendar app of your phone. Of course, it does not have to be a certain day as long as you do check regularly.

When to Start Self Examining Your Breasts

Breast cancer can affect women (and men) of any age, but is most common in women over 50. Some breast cancers appear earlier, particularly if there are hereditary factors, so medical screening and tests should begin at an earlier age for them. If you have a family history of breast cancer, then you can request tests to see if you are at a higher risk for developing the disease yourself. It is important for women to start self examining their breasts in early adulthood to understand what is normal for their bodies.

How to Perform a Self Examination

Firstly, make sure you are warm and relaxed. Many women find it easiest to do a self exam on their breasts during a shower or bath. Next, stand in front of a mirror and look at your breasts with your arms by your side and look closely at your nipples, the shape of your breasts and your armpits. Repeat again with your arms raised above your head.

You should be looking for:

- Inverted nipples (where they turn inwards)
- A rash or redness around the nipples
- Discharge or bleeding from the nipples
- Sores on or around the nipples
- Any visible changes in your breasts, armpits and collarbones, such as dimpling or puckering
- Any changes in the size and shape of your breasts

- Any visible differences between each breast

Please note that it is common to have one breast slightly larger, or one may hang lower, but you need to know what is normal for you.

Next, you should self exam your breasts including high into your armpits, up to your collarbone and below your breasts. It is easiest if you do this with a soapy hand. Use the alternate hand to examine each breast. Use the pads of two or three fingers and make small circular movements starting at the nipples and working out towards the edge of the breasts, again in a circular fashion. Vary your pressure from light to firm. You should be feeling for any lumps and for any unusual thickening of the breast tissue.

Now, check for lumps in your armpit and along your collar bone as the breast tissue reaches into the armpit. Many lymph nodes can be found in both these areas. Again, use the pads of your fingers and you may find it easier to use a sweeping motion here rather than circular.

This physical self exam needs to be done both standing up and lying down. When you are lying down, hold your left arm up to examine your left breast with the right hand and swap over for the right breast.

What Does a Breast Lump Feel Like?

Breast lumps can feel different. They can be hard or soft, painful or not, and may move around when you touch them or feel fixed in position (immobile). They may be as small as a pea or they may be a larger mass. It is important to know that even if you find a lump it may not be breast cancer. In fact, many lumps are benign. It is equally important to get any lump checked out immediately though.

When Should You See a Doctor?

If you discover a breast lump or notice any changes in your breasts or the surrounding areas, it is important to seek medical advice straight away.

Breast cancers will not grow overnight but the earlier the detection the greater chances there are of successful treatment and survival. Of course, it is also possible that it may not be cancer, so the earlier medical advice is sought, the better it will be for the patient’s own mental wellbeing too.

What Happens Next?

Your doctor will examine your breasts much in the same way that you do when you self exam. They may then refer you for further tests depending on what they discover. It could be a mammogram (x-ray of the breast area), an ultrasound (using sonic waves to see inside the breast) a biopsy (taking tissue samples), or possibly a combination of all three.