

# Breast Awareness and Self-Exam: A Health Habit for Life

*Some breast changes can be felt by a woman or her health care provider, but most can be detected only during an imaging procedure such as a mammogram, MRI, or ultrasound. Whether a breast change was found by your doctor or you noticed a change, it's important to follow up with your doctor to have the change checked and properly diagnosed. (National Cancer Institute, 10/2018)*

*"Although breast self-examination has not been shown to lower deaths from breast cancer, it is important for women to become familiar with their breasts so that they can be aware of any changes and report these to their doctor. Cancers that are growing more quickly are often found through breast examinations in between regular mammograms." (Cancer.net/American Society of Clinical Oncology, 1/2019)*

Though there are different recommendations when it comes to screening for breast cancer, all agree that the most important things you can do are:

- ✓ become familiar with the look and feel of your breasts, and report any change to your doctor right away
- ✓ follow the recommendations for your age/risk group for getting routine screening mammography

## Be Breast Aware

It is important to become familiar with the way your breasts normally look and feel. Everyone is different, and knowing what is normal for you may help you quickly notice changes. If you see or feel any new breast changes, see your doctor as soon as you find them.

***Remember, most breast changes are not cancer, but only a health care professional can tell for sure.***

## Detecting Breast Changes

- ✓ Know how your breasts normally look and feel and feel your breasts for changes (breast awareness).
- ✓ Use a step-by-step breast self-exam (BSE) monthly.

Most medical organizations, such as the American Cancer Society, no longer recommend routine BSE because research studies have not shown a clear benefit. However, the ACS, and many doctors, do recommend that women become familiar with how their breasts normally look and feel so they can report any changes right away. Breast exam is one way to become familiar with your breasts.

The best time for you to examine your breasts is when they are not tender or swollen. If you choose to do BSE, the information on the following pages provides a step-by-step approach for the exam. Talk to your doctor or nurse practitioner about your BSE technique during your next visit.

## LOOK

### Step 1

Stand in front of a mirror that allows you to see your breasts clearly. Stand with your shoulder straight and your hands on your hips.

Look and see that your breasts are their usual size, shape, and color - with no distortion or swelling.

Contact your doctor if you see dimpling, bulging, puckering, redness, rash, or areas with scaly skin

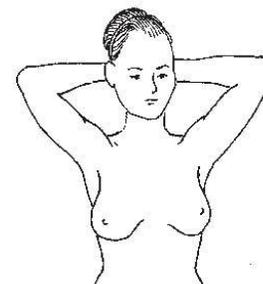


### Step 2

1. Raise your arms over your head or put your hands behind your head and look for the same changes.

### Step 3

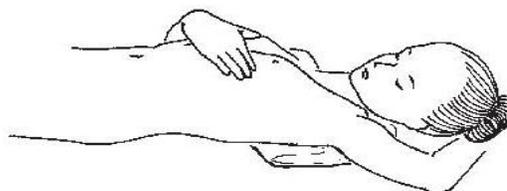
While in front of the mirror, check for any sign of fluid coming from the nipple and make sure there are no changes in the shape or position of the nipple (An inverted nipple is pushed inward instead of pointing outwards.)



## FEEL

### Step 4

Lie flat on your back, with one arm over your head and a pillow or folded towel under the shoulder of the breast you are examining. This position flattens the breast and makes it easier to check. Check each breast and the area around it very carefully.



Use the finger pads of the 3 middle fingers of your other hand to check the breast and the surrounding area. (Right hand for left breast, left hand for right breast) Use overlapping dime-sized circular motions of the finger pads to feel the breast tissue. Use light, medium, and firm pressure to feel all the breast tissue in one spot before moving to the next spot. It is normal to feel a firm ridge in the lower curve of each breast but you should tell your doctor if you feel anything else out of the ordinary.

## Breast Self-Exam Pattern

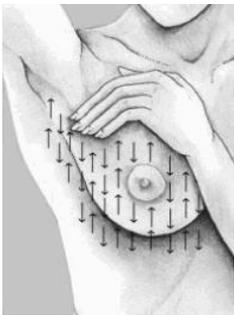
Some research suggests you may do a more thorough exam if you use a pattern. You can move your fingers in up-and-down lines or strips or use a circular pattern. Check the area above the breast, up to the collarbone and all the way over to your shoulder. Cover the whole breast.

### Line Pattern

Move around the breast in an up and down pattern starting at an imaginary line drawn straight down your side from your underarm. Move across the breast to the middle of the chest bone (breastbone). Check the entire breast going down until you feel only ribs and up to the neck/collarbone.

Repeat the exam on the other breast. Use your left hand to feel the right breast, and your right hand to feel your left breast. Keep the other arm behind your head.

### Step 5



Examine each underarm while sitting up or standing and with your arm only slightly raised so you can easily feel in this area. (Raising your arm straight up tightens the tissue makes it harder to examine.)

## Frequently Asked Questions

### Who can do BSE?

- Any one over age 20, including during pregnancy and breastfeeding and after breast removal or implant. (Ask your doctor for instructions.)

### If I choose to do BSE, when should I do it?

- Best for men and women: Same day each month
- Still having periods: At the end of your period.
- Breast-feeding mothers: On the same day each month at a time of day when you have finished nursing.
- Had a hysterectomy and still have monthly swelling and tender breasts: After the symptoms go away.

## American Cancer Society (ACS) Guidelines

Women at average risk for breast cancer

- Women 40-44: may have a mammogram every year
- Women 45-54: should have a mammogram every year
- Women 55 and older: Mammogram very year **OR** every other year. Continue as long as you are in good health and expected to live at least 10 more years. *(continued on next page)*

Women at **high risk** should get a breast MRI and a mammogram every year, typically starting at age 30. You may be high risk if you have a personal history of breast cancer, you have a BRCA1 or BRCA2 gene mutation, you have a first-degree relative (parent, brother, sister, or child) with a *BRCA1* or *BRCA2* gene mutation, or you had radiation therapy to the chest before age 30

Clinical Breast Exams (CBE), which is a physical breast exam done by your provider, is not recommended by ACS for women with at average risk but may be indicated for women at high risk.

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF), however, recommends a clinical breast examination along with mammography for all women.

For more information:

**National Cancer Institute/Breast Cancer** <https://www.cancer.gov/types/breast/patient/breast-screening-pdq>

**National Breast Cancer Foundation**  
<http://www.nationalbreastcancer.org/breast-self-exam>

**USPSTF** <https://www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org/uspstf/recommendation/breast-cancer-screening>

**American Cancer Society/ Breast Cancer**  
<https://www.cancer.org/cancer/breast-cancer.html>  
(choose Early Detection and Diagnosis)

