

How to take care of your breasts



By Dr. Simone von Wietershiem

Ms S. is a 23-year old student that I see regularly for her yearly Pap-smear and breast examination. She is very aware about her health and constantly seeks advice to maintain a healthy lifestyle and do all necessary screenings and investigations. One day she comes into my consulting rooms and tells me about a 'mass' that she recognised in her right breast, which has not been there before. She is quite worried, since a distant aunt of hers had breast cancer, and she asks me to please refer her for a mammogram (an x-ray of the breasts). During a clinical examination I feel a very small, painless and moveable lump, but otherwise no abnormalities like swollen lymph nodes, rough skin or an inverted nipple. I reassure Ms S. that this is most probably a harmless growth and it that it is very unlikely to have breast cancer at her age, except if it runs genetically in her (close) family. On top of that it is not generally recommended for women under 40 years of age to have mammograms, because their breast tissue is still very dense and the x-ray is difficult to interpret. Since she is very worried I send her for a breast ultrasound, which supports the diagnosis of a benign (non-cancerous) tumour. Since it does not cause her any pain or other trouble I recommend to just check its size regularly, by continuing with her monthly breast-self-exams.

Above is a clear example of how concerned many of us are about breast cancer. It is indeed the most common type of cancer affecting women worldwide and probably most of us have at least one friend or relative who has been diagnosed. If this awareness about breast cancer would lead to all women being as disciplined as Ms S. with her regular self-exams and check-ups, this would be a blessing, since breast cancer is one type of cancer that can be treated quite effectively, if detected at an early stage.

FACTS ON BREAST CANCER

One in eight women will be diagnosed with breast cancer during their lifetime. The cancer usually (in 80% of cases) occurs in women aged 50 and over, and the risk continues to increase with age. Although men can also get breast cancer, women have a 100 times higher risk. Other risk factors are a family history of cancer (a close relative with breast, uterine, ovarian or colon cancer), obesity, long-term use of hormone-replacement therapy, as well as early start of menstruation (before age of 12) or late menopause (after age 55). Women who have never had children or who had them only after the age 30 have an increased risk for breast cancer as well. General recommendations to reduce your risk of developing breast cancer include:

- Eating a well-balanced diet
- Maintaining a healthy weight
- Doing regular exercise and
- Not drinking too much alcohol.

SYMPTOMS

Early breast cancer usually does not cause any symptoms. This is why regular self-examination of the breasts is so important. Symptoms at a later stage may include a lump in the breast or the armpit, changes in size and shape of the breasts, the skin or the nipple, or a discharge from the nipple.

The most common examinations for breast cancer include clinical examination, mammography, ultrasound, and breast biopsy, which means removing a small part of a lump by needle or a small cut, to examine the material for cancer cells. Treatment for breast cancer will always depend on the type and on how far the cancer has spread. Possible treatments are chemotherapy, radiation therapy, surgery (to remove the lump or the whole breast) and hormonal therapy, or a combination of one or more.

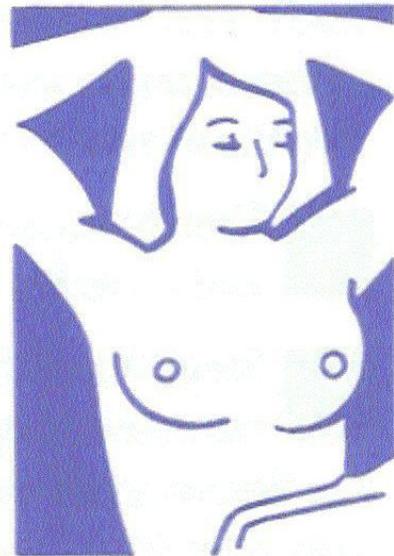
NORMAL BREAST CHANGES

Because of varying levels of the female hormones oestrogen and progesterone in your body, your breasts are undergoing constant changes throughout your life. For example, from puberty onwards your breasts may feel heavier and fuller just before your periods. During this time they may also be tender and you might feel some lumps that have not been there before. Between ages 20 and 30 many women (especially black women) develop fibro adenomas, which are harmless tumours and usually do not require treatment. Still, any breast lump should be evaluated by a health practitioner.

During pregnancy, your breasts also undergo significant changes: Tingling and soreness of the breasts are early signs of pregnancy, and the breasts and the areola become bigger as the months are progressing. Also, when breastfeeding, your breasts may change their size many times a day according to the baby's feeding pattern. After breastfeeding the breasts become smaller again, but they may stay a different size and be less firm than before pregnancy.

From the age of 35 glandular tissue of the breasts is gradually replaced by fat. At this time it is quite common to develop breast cysts. These are fluid-filled lumps that are not cancerous and which will often disappear after menopause. They usually don't require treatment, unless they are painful or very large. During and after menopause the breasts then lose firmness, change size and may droop, due to falling oestrogen levels in the body.

BREAST SELF-EXAMINATION (BSE)



Regular self-examination of your breasts is a very useful and essential screening method for breast cancer. Not every cancer can be found this way, but often a cancer will be found much earlier, when it could still be treated successfully. For many women breast-self-examination (BSE) might be frustrating, because there are many things to feel and one doesn't know what they could be. But by engaging in regular BSEs you will quickly get to know exactly how your breasts look and feel, and then easily notice any significant changes.

BSE should best be performed once a month, shortly after your period ends (when your breasts are least likely to be lumpy and swollen), or on any day that is easy to remember, if you don't have your periods any more. The examination should always include visual inspection - looking at your breasts in the mirror - and manual inspection - feeling your breasts in a standing and lying position - and should involve both breasts up to the collarbones and the armpits.

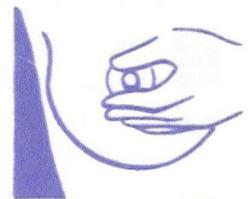
Breast changes to be looking and feeling for are:

- Changes in size or shape of a breast
- Redness or a rash on the skin
- A lump or thickening that feels different from the rest of the breast tissue
- A change in skin texture (like orange skin)
- Discharge from one or both your nipples
- A swelling in your armpit or around your collarbone
- An inverted (pulled-in) nipple or
- A constant pain in your breast or your armpit.

Although every woman will develop her own routine and examination pattern for her monthly BSEs, here is just an example for a step-by-step approach:

Stand in front of the mirror. Put your hands on your hips and look at your breasts in the mirror. Look for the changes listed above. Raise your hands behind your head and again look for the above changes.

Take your right hand down to feel your left breast. Hold the three middle fingers flat together and apply pressure in a circular motion moving up and down in lines from top to bottom and side to side of the breast. First use light, then medium, and finally firm pressure, to reach all the layers of tissue in



your breasts.

Still with your right hand, feel for any lumps or swellings in your left armpit and around the collarbone.

Take your right hand back up and repeat steps 3 and 4 with the left hand, examining the right side.

After the examination, repeat above steps in a lying position.

If you notice anything abnormal during your monthly examination, there is no need to panic. Most breast changes picked up by self-examination are NOT a cancer. Still, it is important to visit a doctor or clinic as soon as possible after noticing any change in order to get an expert opinion and go for further examinations, if necessary.

Breast self-examinations are once more an opportunity to take your life - and your breasts - into your own hands. So go for it, ladies!