

What is breast cancer and how do you check for it?

Most women have heard of breast cancer. But many do not know what it is. Not all women know that we should examine our breasts to check for lumps. Many do not know how to do the examination.

First let's understand more about cancer. Cancer can start in any part of the body. The body is made up of tiny cells. If the cells change from being normal, they become cancer cells and attack other healthy cells in the body.

Can any woman get breast cancer?

Yes, but some women have a greater chance of getting breast cancer than other women. Those most likely to get breast cancer are:

- ♦ Women who are older than 40 years.
- ♦ Women who have never breastfed by the age of 30.
- ♦ Women whose mother or sister have breast cancer.
- ♦ Women who are smoking.

How can we find the cancer before it gets too bad?

The only way to do this is to examine your breasts every month. You should

examine your breasts after your period has finished. If you do not get periods anymore, then you can do it on the first day of every month. You have a better chance for survival if the cancer is found before it has developed too far.

What do we look for in our breasts?

All breasts have lumps. They are made up of tiny bags and pipes that make milk. Often the first thing you feel when there is something wrong with a breast is a new area of lumpiness. This is not to say a new lump is cancer. There are other diseases that can affect the breast besides breast cancer. But there is no way you will know what is causing a breast lump until a doctor cuts the lump out and do some tests on it.

Another way to notice something wrong with your breasts is when water, blood or puss comes out of your breast. Blood coming from the nipple is an early sign of cancer.

Many women worry that painful breasts are a sign of cancer. This is usually not true. Many women experi-

ence painful breasts especially before and during menstruation.

It is very important to examine your breasts regularly. Many women are scared of examining their breasts in case they find something wrong. But remember, it is best to make it part of your life to examine your breasts. This way if something is wrong you can do something about it at an early stage.

Getting to know our bodies, and how they work, gives us more control over our lives. And we can educate other women and men about these things. Health is our right!

(Information from SPEAK. Another book available on breast cancer at the Sister Resource Centre is Our Bodies, Ourselves.)

DICTIONARY

Mastectomy: An operation to remove a breast.

Biopsy: When a doctor does a biopsy of a breast lump she removes the lump during an operation to do some tests on it. The tests will be to see if the lump carries cancer or not.