



MEDICAL MUTUAL®

Your Health: How to Do a Breast Self-Exam



A breast self-exam is when you check your breasts for lumps or changes. This regular exam helps you learn how your breasts normally look and feel.

If you notice a change that concerns you, call your doctor. Most breast problems or changes are not because of cancer.

Breast self-exam is not a substitute for a mammogram. Having regular breast exams by your doctor and regular mammograms improve your chances of finding any problems with your breasts.

If you have breast implants, talk to your doctor about doing breast self-exams.

How do you do a breast self-exam?

Some women set a time each month to do a step-by-step breast self-exam. The best time to examine your breasts is usually one week after your menstrual period begins. Your breasts should not be tender then. If you do not have periods, you might do your exam on a day of the month that is easy to remember.

If you want to do regular breast self-exams, ask your doctor to review the way you do them. Your

doctor may give you advice on how to do certain movements to help you feel for changes.

To examine your breasts:

- Remove all your clothes above the waist and lie down. When you are lying down, your breast tissue spreads evenly over your chest wall, which makes it easier to feel all your breast tissue.
- Use the pads—not the fingertips—of the three middle fingers of your left hand to check your right breast. Move your fingers slowly in small coin-sized circles that overlap.
- Use three levels of pressure to feel of all your breast tissue. Use light pressure to feel the tissue close to the skin surface. Use medium pressure to feel a little deeper. Use firm pressure to feel your tissue close to your breastbone and ribs. Use each pressure level to feel your breast tissue before moving on to the next spot.
- Continue checking your entire breast, moving up and down as if following a strip from the collarbone to the bra line, and from the armpit to the ribs.
- Repeat this procedure for your left breast, using the pads of the 3 middle fingers of your right hand.

To examine your breasts while in the shower:

- Place one arm over your head and lightly soap your breast on that side.
- Using the pads of your fingers, gently move your hand over your breast (in the strip pattern described above), feeling carefully for any lumps or changes.
- Repeat for the other breast.

What are the risks?

The risk of doing a breast self-exam is that you may find a breast change that may lead to a biopsy but the change then turns out not to be cancer.

What should you do if you find something?

If you find anything that concerns you, schedule a visit with your doctor. The important thing is to learn what is normal for you and to report any changes to your doctor.

Remember that most changes you find are not breast cancer, but they should be checked. These changes may include:

- A new lump. It may or may not be painful when you touch it.

- Unusual thick areas.
- Discharge from your nipples if you are not breastfeeding.
- A change in the skin of your breasts or nipples, such as puckering or dimpling.
- An increase in the size of one breast, or if one breast is suddenly lower than the other.

How do you reduce your risk of breast cancer?

To reduce your risk for breast cancer, stay at a healthy weight and get regular exercise. If you think you notice a change in your breast, tell your doctor right away.

If you think you may be at risk for breast cancer and you are taking hormone therapy to treat symptoms of menopause, talk to your doctor. He or she may suggest other options.