



### **Breast Awareness**

Breast cancer is the most common cancer in the UK and may affect one in nine women at some time in their life. Breast screening and breast awareness can help early detection and reduce the number of deaths from breast cancer.

Regular breast self examination makes you aware of the normal feel of your breasts. This increased awareness will help you identify problems earlier. It is important to remember that a lump does not mean cancer, in fact only one in every ten lumps turns out to be cancer. Early detection of a breast cancer usually means more simple treatment options and better outcomes. You should always consult a doctor once you are aware of an unusual breast sign as there are other less serious conditions which can cause breast lumps. In the UK, breast screening is offered to all women over the age of 50 every 3 years. The test used is a mammogram (breast X-ray) to look for breast cancer.

### **Breast awareness**

Being breast aware means being familiar with how your breasts look and feel normally, and how they change at different times of the month. Knowing what is normal for you means you can detect any changes.

### **Breast self examination.**

There is no one correct time or technique for breast examination. Women should get into the habit of feeling and looking at their breasts from time to time. Being breast aware means being aware of changes throughout the month. There is no correct technique to use but you should be consistent. Many women find it convenient to look at their breasts when preparing for a bath or shower. Having soapy hands can help as the hand will slide more easily over the breasts. Some women find it more comfortable to feel their breasts when lying on the bed, in which case a skin lotion or moisturiser may help the hand slide over the breasts.

- It is also important to look at the breasts from various angles using a mirror
- Each breast is different and will change in appearance and feel as they can be affected by the menstrual cycle, age, pregnancy, the menopause and taking hormonal contraception
- Breasts often become tender and lumpy before a period. They become soft immediately afterwards
- After the menopause, breasts may feel softer and less lumpy. These changes are normal.

It is important to check with your doctor if you experience certain changes:

- changes in the shape of your breasts, eg flattening or swelling

- changes in the nipple, eg newly turned-in nipple
- any discharge from the nipple (unless you are breastfeeding and it's milky discharge)
- swelling or a lump in the breast or armpit
- dimpling of the skin (skin looks like the texture of orange peel)
- a rash or crusting on the nipple or surrounding area
- veins which stand out more than usual
- any changes in sensation, especially if in one breast only
- change in size of your breasts (after puberty is complete)
- continuous pain in part of the breast or armpit

Remember, you need to look and feel for any changes in your breasts that are unusual for you. The doctor will examine your breast and depending on the symptoms you have he may arrange further tests. This will be an ultrasound scan or mammogram, or referral directly to a specialist breast clinic.

### **What is a mammogram?**

The main form of breast screening for women is mammography, which is a low-dose X-ray of the breast tissue. Mammography can not only detect breast cancer, but it can show other breast problems that are not cancerous. Mammography may detect lumps before they can be felt and it can also show small deposits of calcium in the breast, which may be a sign of early cancer. Women with a family history of breast cancer may be offered regular mammograms from an earlier age but this depends on who has been affected in your family. You need to discuss this with your GP.

Younger women are not routinely invited for screening but your GP will arrange it for you if you are regarded as high risk, otherwise you can arrange a private breast screen through Northside clinic or at a lot of private hospitals. You should not stop breast self examination because you have had a recent breast screen.

### **Having a mammogram**

You will need to undress to the waist in a private changing area, so it may be best to wear a skirt or trousers. The radiographer will help you to get into the right position for the X-ray. Each breast is positioned between two special plates and you must then remain still for a short time while the X-rays are taken (one from the side and one from above). Some women find the pressure of these plates uncomfortable, but the X-ray takes only a few seconds and the pressure of the plates is not harmful.

Depending on the centre that you attend for the test, the results may be given to you on the same day, or they may be posted out to you.

### **Breast Ultrasound.**

This test is particularly useful in young women. It is not used routinely in the National Breast screening programme but your Doctor may arrange this further investigation if a breast abnormality is detected.

You will need to undress to the waist in private. The ultrasonographer will rub a probe and gel over the skin of your breast looking at images on a screen and this is usually painless. The results are sent to the doctor arranging the test.

Five-point breast awareness code

The main UK breast cancer charities recommend a five-point code:

- Know what is normal for you
- Check both the look and feel of your breasts
- Know what changes to look for and feel
- Report any changes to your GP without delay
- Attend for routine breast screening if you are aged 50 or over

Further information

Breast Cancer Care – tel 020 7384 2984

<http://www.breastcancercare.org.uk>

Breakthrough Breast Cancer – tel 020 7405 5111

<http://www.breakthrough.org.uk>