
BREAST CANCER

Steps to finding breast lumps early

How can I find breast cancer early?

The best way to find breast lumps that may be cancer is to do two things:

1. Have regular mammograms.
2. Have your doctor check your breasts every year.

Doing all three gives you the best chance to find cancer as early as you can. Finding breast cancer early makes treatment much easier and more effective. Breast cancer is rare in women under 40.

What is a mammogram?

A *mammogram* is the most effective way to find breast cancer early, up to two years before the lump is even large enough to feel. A mammogram is a special kind of x-ray of your breasts. A *radiologist* will look at the x-rays for signs of cancer or other breast problems.

Mammograms can detect cancer because cancer is *denser* (thicker) than the normal part of the breast. Mammograms are safe because the amount of radiation used in the x-ray is very small.



How is a mammogram performed?

Your breast will rest on a shelf and the x-ray machine will be slowly pressed against your breast until you feel pressure. This pressure is needed to spread your breast out so that a better x-ray can be taken. The pressure is just for a moment while each picture is taken.

Do mammograms hurt?

Mammograms can be uncomfortable. To get a good picture, the breast has to be squeezed, but they don't take very long.

How often should I get a mammogram?

If you're over 50, get a mammogram on a regular basis, usually every 1 to 2 years, after you talk with your family doctor.

If you have risk factors for breast cancer, such as a family history of breast cancer, your doctor may want you to have mammograms more often or start having them sooner.

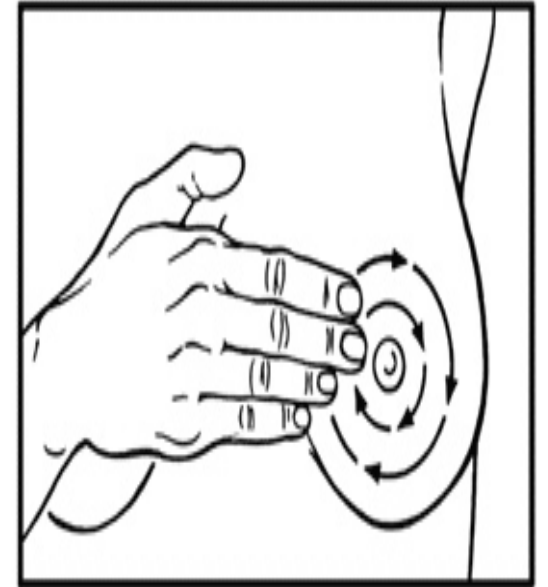
How often should my doctor check my breasts?

Your doctor will often check your breasts at any age when you come for a well woman visit. You should have a breast exam every year beginning when you're 50. Talk with your doctor when it's time for your breasts to be checked and discuss the age and timing that is best for you.

How often should I examine my breasts?

There is data that tells us now that breast self-exam may not help. You can get used to how your breasts normally feel, so you're able to tell if a new lump has appeared but you don't need to do a breast self-exam every month.

If you want to check your breasts, do the exam a few days after your period. Your breasts aren't so sore or as lumpy at this time.



How is a breast exam done?

The doctor starts by standing in front of you. Looking at your breasts with your arms at your side, with your arms raised behind your head, and with your arms on your hips with your chest muscles flexed will help the doctor see any lumps.

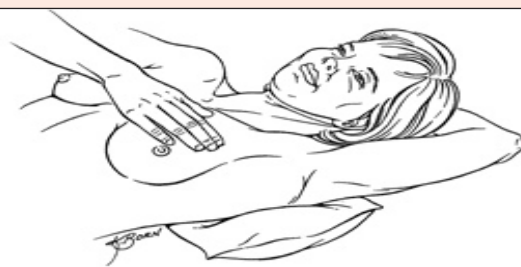
INSERT GRAPHIC HERE Note: 2nd graphic needs to be changed ...arm is no longer put behind head. It is by the side.

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Changes to look for in your breasts

- Unusual thickening of your breasts
- Sticky or bloody discharge from your nipples
- Any changes in the skin of your nipples or breasts, such as puckering or dimpling
- An unusual increase in the size of one breast
- One breast unusually lower than the other



You will then be asked to lie down. Put your arms by your sides. The doctor will examine each breast with the pads of his or her three middle fingers. They will start under your collar bone (clavicle) and work across your breast back and forth in “grids”, moving down the width of one finger. After the doctor finishes checking your breast, they may examine your nipple gently and look for discharge (fluid coming out of the nipple) or blood. The doctor will include the area up into your armpit. You have lymph nodes in this area. Cancer can spread to lymph node tissue.

What is the doctor checking for?

The main thing to look for is any change in your breasts. It’s normal for your breasts to be different sizes. A firm ridge in the lower curve of your breast is also normal.



This brochure provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this brochure applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.

This health education material has been favorably reviewed by the Patient Education Review Committee of the College of Family Physicians of Canada.



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The College of Family Physicians of Canada, one of the nation’s largest medical specialty groups, is committed to promoting and maintaining high standards for family doctors – the doctors who give ongoing, comprehensive care to people of all ages.

This patient education brochure was developed by The College of Family Physicians of Canada in cooperation with the American Academy of Family Physicians.

