

SELF BREAST EXAMINATION

Women 40 years of age and older should have breast examinations annually as part of their routine checkups. If a breast exam is not done during that checkup, you should ask for one. During the examination, the health professional will palpate the breasts and underarms checking for lumps. The breasts are also checked for nipple discharge and visually inspected for any skin changes.

In addition to an annual breast examination by a health professional, women should also perform monthly breast self-examination (BSE). BSE is done once a month so that you become familiar with the usual appearance and feel of your own breasts. Familiarity makes it easier to notice any changes in your breasts from one month to another. In fact, some health professionals suggest that women do it every day for the first month so they thoroughly learn the “geography” of their breasts.

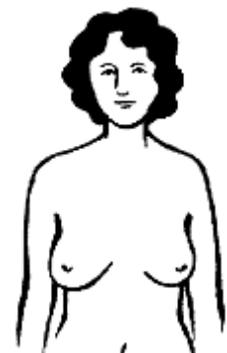
Self-breast examination isn’t difficult, but it does take practice. Women with lumpy breasts may take longer to learn what their normal is, but with patience and practice this knowledge is attainable. It is the early discovery of a change from what is normal for you that is the whole idea behind BSE.

The best time to do a self-breast examination is 2-3 days after the end of your period, when your breasts are least likely to be tender or swollen. Postmenopausal women may find it helpful to choose a particular day, such as the first of the month, to remind themselves that it is time to do a self-breast examination. The earliest sign of breast cancer is a single painless lump. Skin puckering, new nipple retraction or nipple discharge may also occur. If you discover anything unusual, such as a lump or discharge or skin changes, you should see your doctor at once.

Women taking charge of their own health are doing BSE regularly. BSE does not replace an annual examination by a health care professional, but it is an important adjunct. Women who are familiar with their own breast “geography” can often find subtle changes more easily than a health care professional who examines them only once a year.

There is no “right” or “wrong” way to do a BSE. Here is one way:

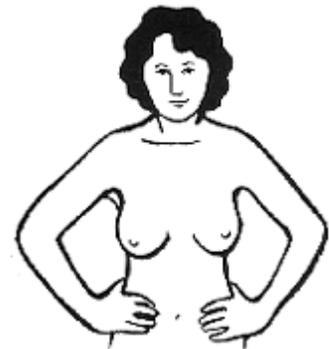
1. Stand before a mirror. Inspect both breasts for anything unusual such as a discharge from the nipples or skin puckering or dimpling.



2. Watching closely in the mirror, clasp your hands behind your head and press your hands forward. This step and the next will help emphasize any change in the shape or contour of your breasts.



3. Next press your hands firmly on your hips and by pulling your shoulders and elbows forward, bow slightly forward towards the mirror.



Many women do the next part of the exam in the shower because fingers will glide easily over soapy skin making it easy to concentrate on the texture underneath.

4. Put your left hand behind your head. Use three or four fingers of your right hand to explore your left breast firmly, carefully, and thoroughly. Beginning at the outer edge, use the flat part of your fingers to make small circular motions while moving your whole hand in a larger circle slowly around the entire breast. When you reach your starting point, make another circle around the breast, this time closer to the nipple. Gradually work more centrally each time you circle the breast until you finally reach the nipple. Be sure to cover the entire breast, and pay special attention to the area between the breast and the underarm. Finally palpate (feel) the left underarm for any lumps.



5. Gently squeeze the left nipple and look for a discharge. If you have any discharge during the month, whether or not it is during self-breast examination, see your healthcare provider.



Repeat steps 4 and 5 on your right breast.

Steps 4 and 5 should also be repeated while lying down. Lie flat on your back with your left arm over your head and a pillow or folded towel under your left shoulder. This position flattens the breast and makes it easier to examine. Use the same circular motions described earlier. Repeat the exam on your right breast.

