

Breast Awareness

What is breast awareness?

In the past, women were taught a step-by-step technique for performing a monthly breast self-exam. Studies, however, have reported that women who were shown a specific technique for breast self-exams were not any more effective in finding an abnormality in their breast than women who did not receive instructions. Therefore, it is not necessary to use a specific method in checking your breasts. What is recommended is to become aware of how your breasts look and feel so that if you notice any differences or changes you can report them to your health care provider.

How do I know if my breasts feel different?

You don't need special training – you just need to know your breasts. By being aware of how your own breasts normally look and feel, you are more likely to notice any changes that take place. Breasts normally feel lumpy. After a woman's period, hormone levels change, making breast tissue softer and less tender so that it's easier to feel any changes. You should feel the entire area including your breast, collarbone and underarms.

If you have had breast reconstruction or breast implants, you still need to be aware of how your breast tissue normally looks and feels. Become familiar with the area around an implant and along the scar line. Finding a change, however, does not mean that you have cancer.

What kind of changes should I look for?

Remember that most of the time, breast changes are not cancer, but here are some changes to look for. If you notice any of these changes, or even a breast change that is not on this list, tell your health care provider.

- A new lump or mass in your breast
- Dimpling of the breast
- A nipple turning inward or pulling to one side
- Swelling or redness of part of the breast
- Skin scaliness
- Nipple discharge other than breast milk
- A lump in the underarm area

MD Anderson's Screening Guidelines for Breast Cancer

MD Anderson's cancer screening guidelines recommend breast awareness as part of breast cancer screening. Try to schedule your clinical breast exam at the time of your regularly scheduled mammogram.

Women at Average Risk of Breast Cancer

Women age 20 to 39 should:

- Have a clinical breast exam every one to three years
- Practice breast awareness

Women age 40 and older should:

- Have a mammogram every year
- Have a clinical breast exam every year
- Practice breast awareness

Women at Increased Risk of Breast Cancer

Women at increased risk of breast cancer may need to be followed more closely. Talk to your health care provider to see if you have risks for breast cancer. Your health care provider will determine the appropriate screening schedule for you.

Women with the following risk factors are at increased risk of breast cancer:

- History of radiation treatment to the chest
- Genetic mutation, including an abnormality in the BRCA 1 or BRCA 2 genes
- History of lobular carcinoma in situ
- A five-year risk of breast cancer 1.7 percent or greater at age 35 or older, as defined by a breast cancer risk assessment tool
- A life-time risk of breast cancer 20 percent or greater, as defined by a breast cancer risk assessment tool

For more information, ask for a copy of the patient information sheet "Breast Cancer Risk Assessment Tool."

Resources

For more information about breast cancer screening recommendations, please visit MD Anderson's prevention and screening webpage at <http://www.mdanderson.org/prevention> and click "Cancer Screening Recommendations."

The American Cancer Society
800-ACS-2345 (800-227-2345)
www.cancer.org

National Cancer Institute's Cancer Information Service (CIS)
800-4-CANCER (800-422-6237)
www.cancer.gov

Susan G. Komen for the Cure
877 -GO-KOMEN (877-465-6636)
www.komen.org