

2. Clinical exam

A breast exam by your physician should be part of a regular health checkup.

American Cancer Society Guidelines

Under age 40 — clinical exam every three years

Over age 40 — clinical exam every year

3. Breast Self Exam (BSE)

It is important for you to be familiar with your own breasts. After you learn how your normal breast tissue feels, you will be able to recognize a change if one occurs.

BSE is encouraged because breast lumps can develop and be noticed between clinical breast exams and mammography. If you detect a lump, you need to contact your physician for a clinical exam, even if your last mammogram was negative.

Most breast lumps are first discovered by women themselves, making monthly BSE an important part of early detection.

American Cancer Society BSE Guidelines

Over age 20 — self exam once a month

These recommendations are intended for women who have no breast symptoms or who are not at increased risk. More frequent examinations may be necessary depending on your risk.

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What are fibrocystic breasts?



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Information for your breast health

Fibrocystic breasts

Fibrocystic changes are the most common cause of breast lumps in women ages 30 to 50 and may also be referred to as fibrocystic disease, cystic disease, chronic cystic mastitis, or mammary dysplasia. This condition is not cancerous. At least 50 percent of women in their reproductive years have lumpy breasts as a result of these non-cancerous conditions.

Diagnosis of fibrocystic changes

Indications of fibrocystic changes can be found by physical examination and mammography (an X-ray of the breast) or diagnosed by a biopsy. Fortunately, only about 5 percent of women who require biopsies (surgical removal) for a fibrocystic condition have the type of changes that would be considered a slight risk factor for cancer.

Causes for fibrocystic changes

The cause of fibrocystic changes is related to the way breast tissue responds to monthly changes in levels of estrogen and progesterone — female hormones produced by the ovaries during a woman's reproductive years. Each month during the menstrual cycle, breast tissue alternately swells and returns to normal. Hormonal stimulation of breast tissue causes blood vessels to swell, milk glands and ducts to enlarge, and the breast to retain water. The breasts frequently feel swollen, painful, tender and lumpy at this time. After menstruation, swelling in the breasts decreases and the breasts feel less tender and lumpy. That's why the best time to examine the breast is right after the menstrual period.

Fibrocystic changes

As a result of repeated hormone stimulation, there is an increase in firmness of tissue and pockets of fluid called cysts may form in obstructed or enlarged milk ducts. The breast tissue may feel like an irregularly shaped area of thicker tissue with a lumpy or ridge-like surface. Fibrocystic tissue may also feel like tiny beads scattered throughout the breast. Generally, fibrocystic changes are found in both breasts and most frequently are found in the upper outer quadrant and the underside of the breast where a ridge may sometimes be felt. Premenopausal women with a fibrocystic condition may experience an increase in the size of lumpy areas in the breast, as well as discomfort ranging from a feeling of fullness or heaviness to a dull ache, extreme sensitivity to touch or a burning sensation. For some women, the pain is so severe that it interferes with exercise or even lying on their stomach. The condition tends to subside after menopause.

Cysts

Cysts are benign fluid-filled sacs in the breast. They are very common and usually women are not aware of them. In fact, in most cases, there are several cysts. However, sometimes they can mimic solid breast tumors on mammograms or during breast self-examination. When this happens, either a breast sonogram (ultrasound) or needle aspiration may be necessary to prove that they are benign cysts. Once a solid lump has been excluded, no further evaluation is required in most cases. Occasionally, a follow-up check will be necessary. If the cyst is tender, removing the fluid with a needle aspiration may relieve discomfort and often gets rid of the cyst for good.

Lumps versus fibrocystic changes

Confusion arises because not all women with lumps have fibrocystic changes. The breast is naturally a lumpy gland. The lumpy consistency arises from milk glands, ducts and the fibrous tissue that separates and supports them. The regular practice of Breast Self Examination (BSE) will help women distinguish the difference between these normal lumps and one that must be evaluated by a physician. A new lump that does not go away or become noticeably smaller within your monthly cycle should be checked by your physician.

Treatment of a fibrocystic condition

The treatment of a fibrocystic condition may require surgical removal (biopsy) of lumps that fail to disappear after observation. For painful breasts, a physician may also recommend aspirin or other pain relievers. In addition, local heat application and a good support bra may be helpful. Some women notice improvement of breast pain by limiting the amount of salt and caffeine in their diets.

A personal plan of action for breast health

There are three equally important aspects of breast health:

1. Mammography

A mammogram is a low-dose breast X-ray that can identify most breast cancers, some even too small to be felt. Recent improvements in mammograms have reduced the amount of radiation necessary, lowering the risks associated with radiation exposure.

American Cancer Society Guidelines

By age 40 — baseline/screening mammogram

Over age 40 — mammogram every year