



Breast awareness

Breast awareness is an important part of a healthy lifestyle. By being aware of how your breasts look and feel at different times, you will learn what is normal for you.

There is no set time or method for becoming familiar with your breasts. You can do this by looking and feeling your breasts in the way that suits you best. Some women find it helpful to do this whilst having a shower using a soapy hand. Others prefer to examine themselves whilst they are dressing. You can ask your practice nurse or GP to show you how to examine your breasts.

A normal breast

Breasts can vary from one woman to the next and as you become older your breasts will change. Here are some of the normal changes a woman can experience:

- Before the menopause, normal breasts can feel different depending on the time of the month. Some women find their breasts become tender and feel a bit lumpy before the start of a period. This is a natural effect of your hormones on the breast around this time.
- During pregnancy, breasts change to get ready for breastfeeding. They may feel tender and become larger. The dark area surrounding the nipple (areola) can also become larger and darker in appearance. Once a woman stops breastfeeding, the breasts return to the way they were before the pregnancy, although sometimes the size may change and they may feel less firm.

- After the menopause, the milk producing tissues stop working and are replaced with fat. The breasts tend to feel less firm and soft.
- Being breast aware is about recognising any changes that are new or different for you.

What to look out for

- Changes to the size or shape of the breast
- Dimpling or puckering of the skin
- Nipples becoming pulled in, changes in shape or position
- Nipple discharge or a rash on or around the nipple
- Lumps or thickening in the breast which seem different to the rest of the breast tissue
- Lumps or swelling in the armpit or around the collarbone
- Pain in the breast or armpit.

Being breast aware plays an important part in any woman's general body awareness regime. Knowing how your breasts look and feel at different times will help you notice any unusual changes. Although most changes will not be a cancer, early detection often means less treatment is needed.

What to do if you find a change

If you notice any unusual changes to your breasts, you should contact your GP as soon as possible. Although most changes will not be a cancer, early detection often means less treatment is needed.

NHS breast screening programme

Women over the age of 50 are offered a mammogram once every three years by the NHS. A mammogram is an x-ray of the breasts that can help detect breast cancer at an early stage.

Mammograms are not routinely offered to women under the age of 50. This is because breast cancer is not common in women under 50, and mammograms are less effective at detecting changes in the breasts of women who have yet to go through the menopause.

You can find out your nearest screening unit by contacting your GP or calling:

- NHS advice in the UK & Wales & NHS24 (Scotland) on 111

A five point breast awareness code

- Know what is normal for you
- Look and feel
- Know what changes to look for
- Report any changes to your doctor without delay
- Attend routine breast screenings if you are aged 50 or over.

You may find the following websites useful

Breast Cancer Care

Tel: 0808 800 6000

Email: info@breastcancercare.org.uk
www.breastcancercare.org.uk/

Macmillan Cancer Support

Tel: 0808 808 0000

www.macmillan.org.uk

NHS Cancer Screening Programmes

Tel: 0114 271 1060

Email: info@cancerscreening.nhs.uk
cancerscreening.nhs.uk/breastscreen