

BREAST CANCER

Most lumps women feel in their breasts are not cancer, but some are. SPEAK looks at breast cancer and explains how to do monthly breast self-examinations

What is cancer?

Our bodies are made up of cells which divide. This is natural. But sometimes the cells start to divide in an uncontrolled way and a tumor or growth forms. If the growth stays where it is and doesn't spread it is called 'benign' which means it is not cancer and can be removed easily. If, however, it spreads through the lymph vessels and blood to other parts of the body it is called 'malignant' or cancer.

In South Africa one in every 15 women stands a chance of getting breast cancer. According to the National Cancer Association the number of women, especially young women getting breast cancer is increasing.

Being aware

A woman's breasts are naturally lumpy. They can also change size when weight is gained or lost. A woman's breasts can change after breastfeeding. Many of these changes are normal and should not cause worry.

Even so, it is important for women to keep in touch with their bodies, so they notice should any changes which are not normal happen.

Keeping healthy - breast self-examinations

The National Cancer Association says women should examine their breasts every month. Women should go to a doctor once a year for a

breast examination as well as a PAP smear test (a test for cancer of the cervix).

The best time for a woman to examine her breasts is straight after her monthly period. Women who do not get periods anymore, should do it on the first day of every month.

See our drawing on how to do a breast self-examination.

All breasts are naturally lumpy because they are made up of tiny bags and pipes that make milk. Many women worry that painful, lumpy breasts are a sign of breast cancer. This is usually not true. Many women have painful breasts, especially before and during their monthly periods.

For women doing breast self-examination

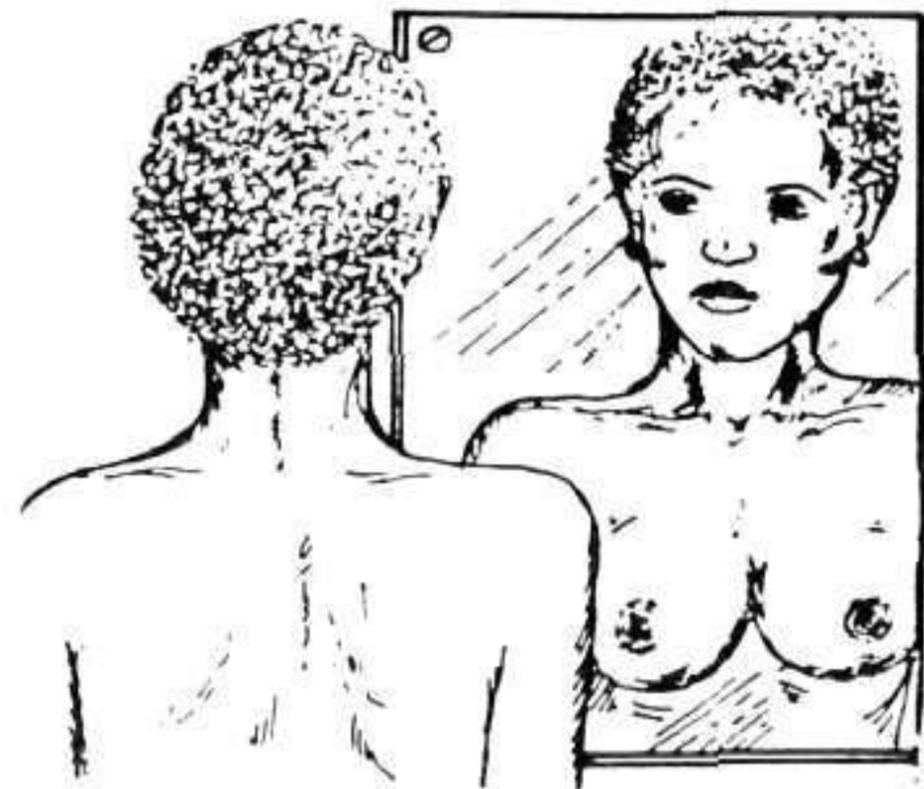
What you should look out for:

■ New lumps or thickening of the breast

Look out for new lumpiness or thickness in your breasts. Even if you find this, it may not necessarily be cancer. There are diseases and problems other than breast cancer which can cause lumps.

But if you do discover a new lump which does not go away throughout the month, it is best to go to a doctor or breast clinic where you can get advice. The doctor may do a biopsy - where she removes some breast tissue so the cells can be examined under a microscope.

Examine your breasts every month after your period



Look at your breasts in front of a mirror. If your breasts change in the way they look, you must go to a doctor.



Lie in the bath or lean up in bed. Use your right hand to feel your left breast, and then your left hand to feel your right breast.



Start at the outside of your breast. Roll the breast under your fingertips, move down and inwards until you have felt all of your breast. Don't forget to feel over the nipple.



If your breasts are big then use both hands to examine. Roll your breast between your fingertips.

SIGNS:

- Go to the clinic if you feel any few new lumps in your breast;
- Go to the clinic if you find blood, milk (unless you are breastfeeding), or if 'pus' coming out of the nipple;
- Go to the clinic if your breasts suddenly look different to how they looked before.

■ **Fluid**

Another way you can notice something may be wrong with your breasts is when water, blood or other liquid comes out of your breast and you are not breastfeeding.

Also look out for:

- unusual changes in the shape and size of your breasts;
- swelling under your armpit or upper arm;
- dimpling of the skin on your breasts;
- should your nipples suddenly turn in.

Mammograms

Mammograms are another way of testing for abnormal lumps in the breast. Mammograms are expensive and are usually only done on women who are at high risk for breast cancer. It would be a good thing for all women over 50 years old to have a mammogram once a year.

Who can get breast cancer?

All women have a chance of getting breast cancer but some women have a greater chance than others. Those more likely to get breast cancer are:

- women who are over 40 years of age;
- women who have never borne children or who have had children late in life;
- women who have a close female relative, like a mother or a sister with breast cancer.

Dealing with breast cancer

If a woman has breast cancer there are different steps to take, depending on how far it has spread.

In some cases, surgeons may feel it is necessary to remove the lump in a small operation called a lumpectomy or the breast in an operation called a mastectomy. In other cases, chemotherapy (treatment with anti-cancer drugs) or radiotherapy (treatment with high energy rays like X-rays. This destroys the cancer while doing as little harm as possible to the normal cells) may also be used.

Whatever happens, a woman has a right to decide what course of treatment she wants.

Breast cancer can be very difficult to deal with emotionally and it is important for women who do

have breast cancer to have support from family, friends and other women in the same position.

Many women are too scared to examine their breasts in case they do find a lump. Try not to be scared and just make it part of your life. The earlier you find something wrong the the easier it is to treat. You may never find something wrong - but at least you are in touch with your own body!

Reach for Recovery is a support group for women who have breast cancer. It is made up of women who have had breast cancer. If you want to find out more about Reach for Recovery, or breast cancer, write to Ms Zerilda Nel, National Cancer Association, PO Box 2000, Johannesburg, 2000, South Africa. Or phone (011) 403 2825. She will be able to put you in touch with their offices in other parts of the country.

Most teaching hospitals in South Africa have breast clinics:

- Addington Hospital in Durban
- Johannesburg General and Hillbrow Hospitals in Johannesburg
- Groote Schuur and Tygerberg Hospitals in Cape Town
- HF Verwoerd Hospital in Pretoria

Amongst the other hospitals which have breast clinics are:

- Frere Hospital in East London
- Livingstone Hospital in Port Elizabeth ○

