

Fact Sheet

Breast Awareness and Common Breast Problems



It is important for you to be aware of how your breasts normally look and feel, so that if there are any changes, you can seek help quickly. Most breast changes are due to benign conditions, but it is of course important to exclude breast cancer, as it is the most commonly diagnosed cancer in women in Australia, with one in eight women being affected by the age of 85.

Breast awareness

There are three steps to being breast aware:

1. Get to know the normal look and feel of your breasts
2. See your doctor if you notice any unusual changes
3. If you are aged 50 to 74, have a free mammogram at BreastScreen every 2 years

There is no right or wrong way to examine your breasts, but the following tips might help:



In the shower



In front of a mirror



Lying down

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Family Planning NSW is a not-for-profit organisation funded by the NSW Ministry of Health

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- Use a mirror to become familiar with the usual look and shape of your breasts
- Become familiar with the normal feel of your breasts at different times of the month. You might find this easiest in the shower or bath, lying in bed or getting dressed
- Feel all the breast tissue, from the collarbone to below the bra line and under the armpit
- Use the pads of your fingers to feel near the surface, and then press more firmly to feel deeper in the breast

Women of all ages should be familiar with their breasts, but it is more important the older you get, as the risk of breast cancer increases with age.

Changes to look out for include:

- A lump or lumpiness, especially if it is in one breast
- A change to the shape or size of your breast
- Changes to the skin over the breast, such as thickening, dimpling or redness
- An unusual persistent pain, particularly if it is in one breast
- Changes to the nipple, such as inversion (turning inwards), crusting or redness
- Nipple discharge

If you notice any of these changes, or any other breast problems you are concerned about, you should see a GP or Family Planning doctor as soon as possible. Be reassured that most breast changes are not due to cancer, but it is important to detect breast cancer as early as possible if it is present.

Screening for breast cancer

The Australian Government funds a national screening program, called BreastScreen, to screen well women between the ages of 50-74 for early signs of breast cancer. This is done by a mammogram (X ray of the breasts). The BreastScreen program is only for women

who do not have any symptoms in their breasts. It is recommended that women aged 50-74 have a screening mammogram every 2 years. Women aged 40-49, and 75 and over may also participate in the program, but it is recommended you discuss the pros and cons with your doctor first. If any changes on the mammogram are found, then you are asked to have further investigations, such as a clinical examination, ultrasound and/or a biopsy. For more information see the BreastScreen Australia or BreastScreen NSW websites.

Common benign breast problems

Fibroglandular tissue

This is the name given to generalised lumpy tissue in the breasts, which is very common. It tends to vary throughout the menstrual cycle due to the influences of changing hormone levels.

Breast cyst

This is a fluid-filled sac which forms within the breast tissue, and can present as a lump. Sometimes there can be several cysts present at once.

Fibroadenoma

This is a benign breast lump which is common in young women. There may be more than one fibroadenoma present at the same time. They are often smooth, firm and mobile. Fibroadenomas do need initial investigation and monitoring, so should be reviewed by a GP or specialist.

Mastalgia (breast pain)

Pain in the breasts typically presents between the ages of 30 and 50, and is not usually a sign of breast cancer or other breast disease. However a thorough history and examination by your health care provider, and possibly some further tests, may be required to be sure that breast cancer is not the cause of the pain. Please see our separate fact sheet entitled 'Breast pain – mastalgia' (http://www.fpnsw.org.au/432325_8.html).

For more information

- Contact the Family Planning Talkline on 1300 658 886 or go to www.fpnsw.org.au/talkline
- Visit your local Family Planning clinic or local GP
- National Breast Cancer Foundation www.nbcf.org
- Cancer Council Australia www.cancer.org.au
- BreastScreen Australia www.cancerscreening.gov.au
- BreastScreen NSW www.bsnsw.org.au

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