

Know your breasts

A guide to breast awareness
and screening

breast
cancer
care

This booklet explains the normal breast changes that can happen at different times throughout your life and how to be aware of any unusual changes. It also includes information on breast screening.





Breast Cancer Care doesn't just support people when they've been diagnosed with breast cancer.

We also highlight the importance of early detection and provide up-to-date, expert information on breast conditions and breast health.

If you have a question about breast health or breast cancer you can call us free on **0808 800 6000** or visit **breastcancercare.org.uk**

We hope you find this information useful. If you'd like to help ensure we're there for other people when they need us visit **breastcancercare.org.uk/donate**

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Introduction

This booklet will help you to be breast aware. Being breast aware means knowing what's normal for you so you can spot any unusual changes as soon as possible.

Most breast changes are not because of breast cancer. However, the sooner breast cancer is diagnosed, the more effective treatment may be. This is why it's important to see your GP as soon as possible if you notice any changes that are unusual for you.

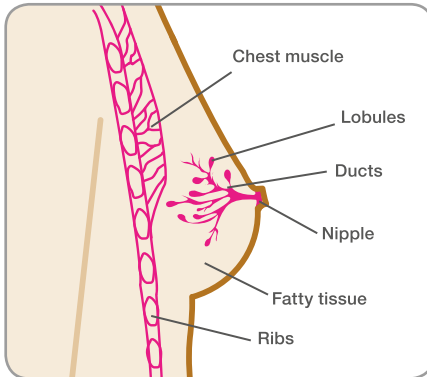
This booklet also includes information about breast screening and what this involves.

Although the booklet is for women, men should also be aware of any changes in their chest area as a very small number of men get breast cancer each year.

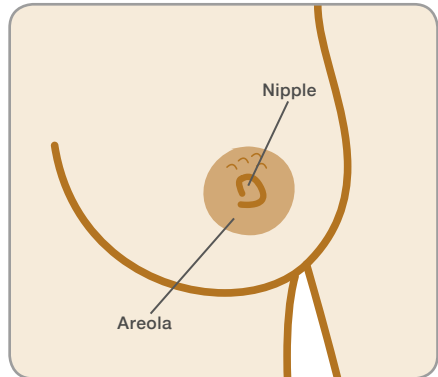
About your breasts

Breasts are made up of lobules and ducts, surrounded by tissue that gives the breasts their size and shape.

The breast



The nipple



Lobules are glands that produce milk to feed a baby. Ducts are tubes that carry breast milk to the nipple, ready for breastfeeding.

The nipple is surrounded by a darker area of skin called the areola. On the areola there are some small raised bumps which produce fluid to moisturise the nipple.

Breast changes throughout your life

Your breasts change throughout your life from puberty, through adolescence and the reproductive years, to the menopause when periods stop permanently. This is because levels of the hormones oestrogen and progesterone in your body change at different times in your life.

Sometimes breast changes are caused by a benign (not cancer) breast condition.

It's important to see your GP about any changes that are new for you, even though for most women these will not be cancer.

When breasts start to develop

Breasts start to develop around the age of 9 to 11, but it's not unusual for them to start earlier or later. By the age of 17, a girl's breasts will usually be fully developed.

When breasts first start to develop, a small bump called a breast bud grows under the areola and the nipple. As the breast buds grow, the areolas get bigger and darker, and the nipples may stick out.

At this time a girl may notice tingling, aching or itching in her chest, and her nipples may swell or become tender. This is all normal.

Lumpiness or tenderness are common at this time. Lumps at this age often turn out to be a benign breast condition called a fibroadenoma. A fibroadenoma has a rubbery texture and moves easily under the skin. For more information see our **Fibroadenoma** leaflet.

Changes around the time of your period

Oestrogen and progesterone play a vital part in regulating a woman's periods. These hormones are responsible for the changes you may notice in your breasts just before your period.

Your breasts may feel heavier and fuller. They may also be tender or lumpy. After a period, this usually lessens or disappears altogether, although some women have tender, lumpy breasts all the time.

Many women have breast pain around the time of their period, which is normal. For more information see our **Breast pain** booklet.

Soreness under the breasts

Soreness or irritation under one or both breasts is common, especially in women with larger breasts.

It usually happens when skin folds rub together causing friction and trapping moisture. The medical name for this is intertrigo and it can happen anywhere on the body where skin rubs against skin.

A warm, moist environment also encourages infection by yeast, fungus or bacteria. If it's severe, treatment may be needed.

There are some simple things you can do to reduce your risk of getting intertrigo or to stop an infection from getting worse. These include:

- washing under your breasts morning and night with a soap substitute, such as emulsifying ointment
- gently drying the skin under your breasts thoroughly after washing
- wearing a well-fitting supportive bra made from a natural material such as cotton
- losing weight if you need to

You can find more information on our website at breastcancercare.org.uk/intertrigo

During pregnancy

Breast changes can be an early sign of pregnancy.

Many pregnant women feel a change in sensation in their breasts such as tingling and soreness, particularly of the nipples. This is due to increased levels of progesterone and the growth of the milk ducts.

The breast and the areola begin to get bigger. The nipple and areola become darker and remain that way during pregnancy.

When breastfeeding

Large amounts of milk are produced to breastfeed a newborn baby and the breasts can change size many times a day according to the baby's feeding pattern.

Nipples can sometimes become sore and cracked, but this generally gets better over time. When breastfeeding stops, the breasts gradually go back to how they were before pregnancy although they may be a different size and less firm than before.

During and after the menopause

As oestrogen levels fall during and after the menopause, the breasts may change size, lose their firmness, feel softer and may droop.

Lumps around the time of the menopause often turn out to be breast cysts. A cyst is a fluid-filled sac. For more information see our **Breast cysts** leaflet.

Tenderness may be due to non-cyclical breast pain, which is pain that is not linked to the menstrual cycle. This may need to be treated with pain relief. For more information, see our **Breast pain** booklet.

Wearing a well-fitting bra

Your breasts change size and shape many times during your life because of the menstrual cycle, pregnancy and breastfeeding, the menopause and putting on or losing weight.

Wearing a well-fitting bra can help if you feel any discomfort or back pain. Department stores and specialist bra shops usually have trained fitters who can help you find a bra that fits you properly.

For more information see our leaflet **Your guide to a well-fitting bra**.

Being breast aware

Breast cancer is the most common cancer in the UK. So whatever your age, it's important to be breast aware.

Being breast aware means getting to know how your breasts look and feel so you know what's normal for you. You'll then be more confident about noticing any unusual changes that might be a symptom of breast cancer.

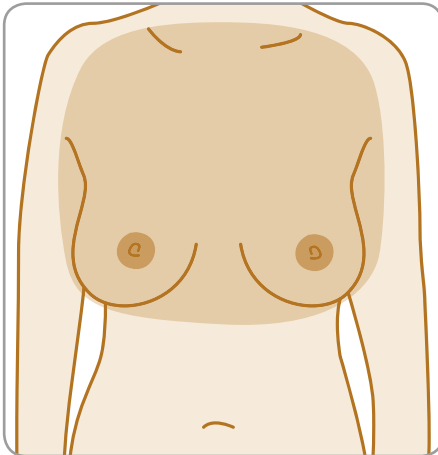
If you notice a change, it's important to see your GP.

How do I check my breasts?

Get used to looking at and feeling your breasts regularly.

A good time to do this might be when you're in the bath or shower, using body lotion or getting dressed.

You don't need to feel your breasts in any special way. If you check them as part of your usual routine you won't need to worry about whether you're doing it often enough. Decide what you're comfortable with and what suits you best.



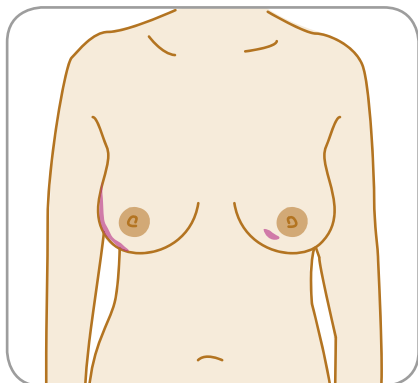
- **Look at and feel your breasts** so you know what's normal for you.
- **Do this regularly** to check for changes.
- **Tell your doctor** as soon as possible if you notice a change.

Check all parts of your breasts, your armpits and up to your collarbone.

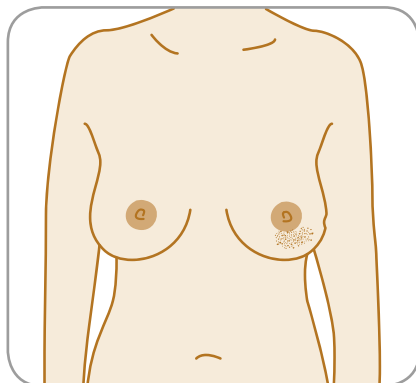
Changes to look and feel for

Everyone's breasts look and feel different. Some women have lumpy breasts, one breast larger than the other or breasts that are different shapes. Some have one or both nipples pulled in (inverted), which can be there from birth or happen when the breasts are developing.

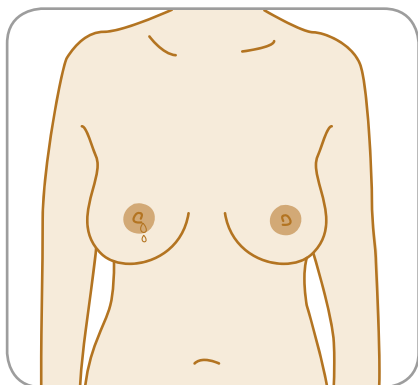
When you check your breasts, be aware of any changes that are different for you.



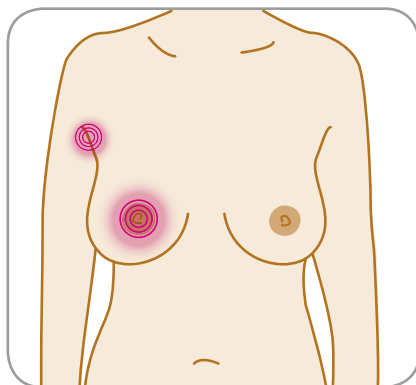
A **lump** or area that feels thicker than the rest of the breast



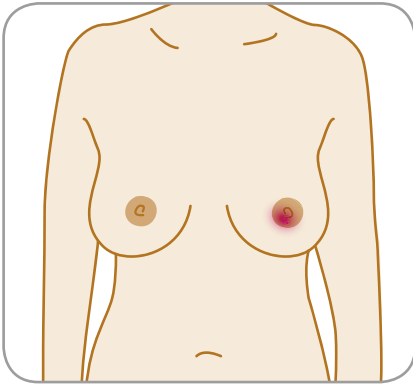
A change to the skin such as **puckering** or **dimpling** (like the skin of an orange)



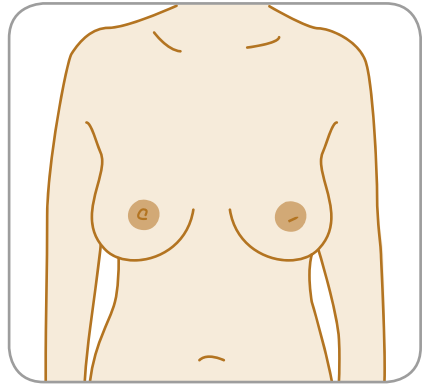
Liquid that comes from the nipple without squeezing



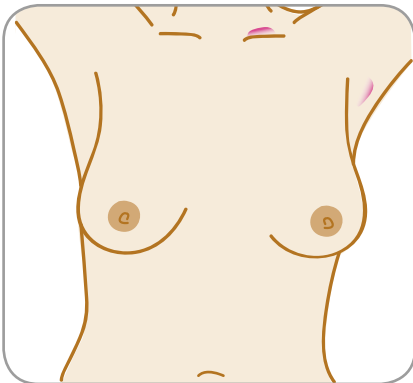
Pain in your breast or your armpit that's there all or almost all the time



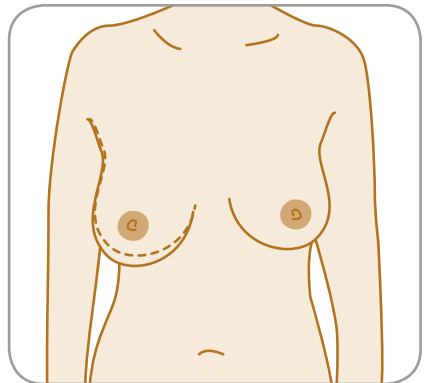
Redness or a **rash** on the skin or around the nipple



A change to the **nipple**, for example it has become pulled in or changed its position or shape



A **swelling** in your armpit or around your collarbone



A change in **size** or **shape** of the breast

What to do if you find a change

You know better than anyone how your breasts look and feel normally, so if you notice a change see your GP as soon as you can.

Most breast changes are likely to be normal or due to a benign (not cancer) breast condition rather than being a sign of breast cancer. But you need to find out what's causing the change.

If your GP is male and you don't feel comfortable going to see him, you can ask if there's a female doctor available. You can also ask for a female nurse or member of staff to be present during your examination, or you can take a friend or relative with you.

When your GP examines your breasts they may feel that there is no need for further investigation, they may ask to see you again after a short time or they may refer you to a breast clinic. This doesn't necessarily mean that you have breast cancer, just that further tests are needed to find out what is going on.

For more information about what happens at a breast clinic and the tests you may have, see our booklet **Your breast clinic appointment**.

Breast screening

The sooner breast cancer is diagnosed, the more effective treatment is likely to be.

Breast screening can pick up breast cancer before there are any signs or symptoms.

Screening uses a breast x-ray, called a mammogram, to look for cancer that may be too small to see or feel.

Breast cancer is the most common cancer in the UK and the number of people diagnosed each year is rising. However, the number of deaths from breast cancer is falling. This is due to a number of factors such as earlier diagnosis, improved and newer treatments, and patients taking part in clinical trials. It may also be due to breast screening.

When will I be invited for screening?

Breast screening age

In the UK, women between the ages of 50 and 70 are invited for a mammogram every three years as part of a national breast screening programme.

This may not happen the year you turn 50, but it will happen by the time you are 53.

You have to be registered with a GP to be automatically invited for screening.

Women over 70

If you're over 70 you will not be automatically sent an invitation for screening.

However, you can continue to have breast screening every three years if you ask for it. Your GP surgery can put you in touch with your local breast screening clinic or you can look them up online.

Women under 50

Women under 50 are not automatically invited for breast screening. This is because the number of women who get breast cancer is much lower in this age group. Over 80% of breast cancers occur in women over the age of 50 and the risk continues to increase with age.

Younger women also have denser breast tissue, which can make the x-ray image less clear and changes harder to identify.

Age extension trial

In England, some breast screening clinics are taking part in a trial where some women under 50 and over 70 are invited for screening. This is to see if it would be beneficial to extend the age range for all women in the future.

As part of the age extension trial, some women aged 47 to 49 and 71 to 73 will be invited for a mammogram.

Women with a significant family history of breast cancer

Most breast cancers are not inherited and do not mean that other family members have an increased risk of getting it.

However, a small number of women have an increased risk of breast cancer because they have a significant family history. These women may be offered breast screening earlier and more frequently.

For more information see our [Family history, genes and breast cancer](#) booklet.

Benefits of breast screening

Finding breast cancer early

Screening can find a breast cancer early, before it can be seen or felt.

The earlier breast cancer is found, the more likely it is to respond well to treatment, and the less likely you are to need a mastectomy (removal of the breast).

Preventing deaths

Screening prevents an estimated 1,300 deaths from breast cancer each year in the UK.

Risks of breast screening

Discomfort

Some women find having a mammogram uncomfortable. However, this isn't always the case and a mammogram only takes a few seconds.

Overtreatment

Some cancers found through breast screening will not develop any further or will grow so slowly that they will never cause any harm during a woman's life.

At the moment, doctors cannot tell which cancers can be left alone, so all cancers are treated. This means some women will have treatment that may be unnecessary (known as overtreatment).

Missed diagnosis

Mammograms are the most reliable way of detecting breast cancer sooner. However, they're not 100% reliable and a small number of breast cancers are missed.

Worry and distress

Around four out of every 100 women screened are recalled for further assessment. This is usually because an area has shown up on the mammogram and more information is needed before a result can be given.

The majority of women recalled do not have breast cancer. However, being recalled or having more tests can cause a lot of worry and distress.

Radiation

Having a mammogram every three years for 20 years means being exposed to a small amount of radiation. This can very slightly increase the risk of developing breast cancer in the future.

The amount of radiation you are exposed to during a mammogram is very low, and you would receive a similar amount from flying between London and Australia and back.

At the breast screening appointment

Breast screening takes place at a breast screening clinic or in some areas a mobile screening unit.

First, you'll be asked to complete a questionnaire. It will ask about any ongoing medical conditions, if you're having hormone replacement therapy (HRT), and if you've had any breast problems.

A female mammography practitioner (an expert in taking breast x-rays) will explain what will happen and answer any questions you have.

Let her know if you're pregnant or think you may be pregnant.

You'll be asked to undress to the waist and stand in front of the mammogram machine.

Your breasts will be placed one at a time on the x-ray machine. The breast will be pressed down firmly on the surface by a clear plate.

At least two pictures of each breast will be taken, one from top to bottom and then a second from side to side to include the part of your breast that extends into your armpit. You'll need to stay in position while the x-ray is taken.

Getting your results

The results of your screening mammogram are sent by post to you and your GP.

Most women will receive a letter telling them that their mammogram showed no signs of cancer. They'll be invited for screening again in three years.

Some women will get a letter asking them to come back for further assessment. This is because more tests are needed to assess a change seen on the mammogram. Being recalled doesn't necessarily mean that you have breast cancer, just that more tests are needed to find out what it is. For more information about these tests, see our booklet **Your breast clinic appointment**.

Occasionally some women receive a letter asking them to go back for another mammogram because a technical issue meant the image was unclear.

Staying breast aware between mammograms

Having mammograms cannot prevent breast cancer, and it's possible for breast cancer to develop in the three years between each mammogram. That's why it's important to continue to be breast aware and report any changes to your GP even if you have had a mammogram recently.

If you would like to discuss breast screening, call our Helpline on **0808 800 6000**.

About this booklet

Know your breasts: a guide to breast awareness and screening was written by Breast Cancer Care's clinical specialists, and reviewed by healthcare professionals and members of the public.



For a full list of the sources we used to research it:

Phone **0345 092 0808**

Email **publications@breastcancercare.org.uk**



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