

Why perform a breast self-exam?

Routine breast self-exams are important in determining changes that may lead to breast cancer. The exams should be performed once a month to familiarize yourself with how your breasts feel normally, so that any changes later can be detected. Finding and treating early signs of breast cancer can save your life.



Resources



You can find out more about breast cancer through the following organizations:

National Cancer Institute's Cancer Information Service

Phone: (800) 422-6237

<http://www.nci.nih.gov>

American Cancer Society

Phone: (202) 4-CANCER

<http://www.cancer.org>

National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program

Phone number: 1-888-842-6355

(select option 7)

<http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/nbccedp/index.htm>

Al-Shifa Clinic

Email: alshifa@u.washington.edu

Website: <http://students.washington.edu/alshifa>

Breast Self-Exam

Part of a healthy lifestyle



How to perform a breast self-exam:

There are three basic steps to a breast exam.

1. Look.

Stand in front of a mirror with your arms down by your side. Look for normal breast size, shape, and color. There are several abnormalities to look for:

1. swelling
2. dimpling or bulging of the skin
3. a nipple that has changed position or inverted (pushed inwards instead of pointing outwards)
4. any redness, swelling, rash, or soreness

If you observe any of these changes, bring this to the attention of your primary care provider.

Perform this same procedure with your arms held above your head.

2. Check.

While standing at the mirror, gently squeeze your nipple between your index finger and thumb. Check for any fluid discharge (blood, yellow or milky fluid).

3. Feel.

While lying down, use your right hand to check your left breast and your left hand to check your right breast. Raise your left arm above your head when checking your left breast, and raise your right arm above your head when checking your right breast.

It is best to use the first few fingers, keeping them flat and together. Use a firm, smooth touch to examine the entire breast. Start with gentle pressure and eventually increase the pressure to reach the deeper tissue. Be sure to feel from top to bottom of the breast, side to side, from the armpit to the cleavage, and from the collarbone to the top of the abdomen.



Perform this same procedure while standing. This may be easier when showering.

There are various patterns to follow in covering the breast, but the most effective are:

- Starting at the nipple and moving outward in larger and larger circles
- Starting at the top of the breast and moving vertically up and down like a lawn mower

If you feel any pain, or find any lumps or abnormalities, report these to your health care provider right away.

Note: Women should try and avoid performing the exam during menstruation due to the natural changes in breast shape during this time. It is best to perform the breast self-exam before or after menstruation.

Images courtesy of the American Cancer Society.