



Breast health guide

It's normal for the size, shape and texture of your breasts to fluctuate. Things like weight gain, exercise, age, pregnancy, breastfeeding and menopause can all cause normal breast changes. This guide will help you practice breast self-awareness, understand breast cancer risk factors and improve your breast health.

What's normal, what's not

Breasts come in different sizes, shapes and textures. So, how do you know what's "normal" and what to be concerned about? Here are some common things to look for when checking your breasts.



Lumps: When examining your breasts, feel around for something hard that doesn't belong there. Lumpy tissue can be prevalent in fibrous breasts. However, if you find a small lump that feels like a frozen pea or lima bean, or smooth and firm like a marble, get it checked by your provider. Any change in your breast tissue — such as a new mass or a change in size or shape — should be examined.

Dense breasts: Breast density refers to the appearance of the breast tissue on a mammogram. About half of all women with breasts have dense breast tissue. A common misconception is that lumpy breast tissue means your breasts are dense — your breasts can feel lumpy but not appear dense on a mammogram. Extreme breast density is associated with an increased risk of breast cancer. If you're notified that your breasts are dense, you should discuss your breast cancer risk factors and screening options with your provider.

Pain: Occasional breast tenderness is common. During menstruation and around the time of menopause, hormonal fluctuations and hormonal therapy can cause pain. If the discomfort or pain is persistent or only in one spot on the breast, your provider may recommend diagnostic imaging.

Skin color and texture: Dimpling or thickening of one-third or more of your breast skin, resembling an orange rind, is often associated with inflammatory breast cancer. This is a rare but aggressive disease that does not usually involve a lump. Inflammatory breast cancer often has a rapid onset of days to weeks for changes to develop.

Nipple discharge: Many women can express milky discharge from their nipples long after they've stopped breastfeeding, including greenish, tan or even black discharge from multiple ducts. Occasional discharge is usually harmless, but you should check with your doctor or other health care provider if discharge comes out on its own (without squeezing), is bloody or comes from a single duct on one breast. These can be signs of a benign mass such as a papilloma, but can also indicate breast cancer. It's important to consult your provider if you experience these symptoms.

Mammograms

A mammogram is an X-ray of the breast. A mammogram is one of the best tools doctors have to find breast cancer early because it can often detect lumps that are too small to be felt. Most doctors recommend an annual mammogram starting at age 40. Check with your provider for personal recommendations based on your risk factors.

Breast self-awareness

Breast self-awareness involves knowing how your breasts normally look and feel. Breast self-awareness doesn't involve a specific examination method or schedule. By really understanding what's normal for your breasts, you can notice small changes more easily and report them to your provider right away.

Risk factors for breast cancer

Several factors can increase your risk of developing breast cancer. The most important ones are below.

Hereditary risk factors

- Family history of breast cancer
- Ashkenazi Jewish ancestry
- Hereditary genetic mutations, most commonly BRCA 1/2 gene mutations, but also including TP53, PTEN, CDH1, ATM, CHEK2 or PALB2

Other risk factors

- Starting menstruation before age 12
- Menopause after age 55
- Never been pregnant or first pregnancy after age 30
- Prolonged hormone therapy during menopause
- Hormonal birth control methods
- Smoking
- Alcohol consumption
- Poor diet

Speak with your provider regarding your risks for breast cancer and any additional screenings that may be appropriate.

Breast health after age 40

As you age, you'll notice physical changes in your breasts. During menopause or leading up to it, the glands that make milk shrink and are replaced with new fat tissue, so your bra cup size may go up. Your breasts may also begin to sag.

During the menstrual cycle, estrogen stimulates the uterus and breast tissue. The more menstrual periods a person has, the longer these tissues are exposed to estrogen, which is a risk factor of breast cancer. Your risk for breast cancer goes up as you get older and begin menopause, which is why it's so important to get regular mammograms.



Changes when you're pregnant or breastfeeding

During pregnancy, it's normal for your breasts to get larger, lumpier and more tender. Your nipples will get darker and blood vessels may become more visible. Sometimes cysts (fluid-filled sacs) and other noncancerous tumors can form or get larger during pregnancy.

You may also experience sore or cracked nipples and, in some cases, plugged milk ducts, which should be treated by a doctor or other health care provider to avoid developing mastitis, a painful infection. Be sure to share concerns about breast changes related to pregnancy or breastfeeding with your provider.

Hormonal birth control

The two most common hormonal birth control options are birth control pills and hormone-secreting intrauterine devices (IUDs). The approaches differ, but both the pill and hormonal IUDs are similar in that each contains synthetic hormones. These contraceptives change your hormone levels, which can increase your risk for breast cancer.

However, once you stop taking the pill or remove the IUD, the risk of breast cancer begins to decrease, and over time returns to that of those who have never taken the pill. It's important to talk to your doctor or other health care provider about the pros and cons of birth control before starting a new method.

Healthy eating and lifestyle habits

No matter your age, you can keep your breasts healthy with simple lifestyle habits. Limit alcohol to one drink a day or less; don't smoke; and maintain a healthy weight. Eliminate processed and fried foods and limit consumption of sugar, white flour and artificial ingredients. Eating a balanced diet of mostly vegetables, fruits, lean protein and healthy fats is shown to prevent many forms of cancer.

Regular exercise is also a great way to reduce your risk for cancer. Strive to get at least 150 minutes of moderate exercise a week. By following these simple tips, you're already on your way to healthier breasts.



Even if you think it's nothing, get checked

Most breast changes or complaints are not caused by cancer, but it's important to get them checked by a doctor or other health care provider. Never ignore a breast problem or wait to see if it goes away on its own. If it is cancer, it will be more curable the earlier it's detected. It's never too early to start thinking about how to have healthy breasts for life, or too late to make changes for the better.

If you are due for a mammogram, visit [multicare.org/mammogram](https://www.multicare.org/mammogram) to schedule an appointment near you.

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