



PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Breast Self-Awareness and Breast Self-Exams (BSE)

This information explains breast self-awareness and breast self-exams.

Breast self-awareness means being familiar with how your breasts normally look and feel. All people should take part in breast self-awareness. This way, you can notice any changes in your breasts. If you notice any changes, such as a new lump or discharge from your nipple, call your doctor.

A breast self-exam (BSE) is a way to examine your breasts on a regular basis to look for any changes. You can do BSEs once a month, occasionally, or not at all. If you choose not to do a BSE, you should still make sure you know how your breasts normally look and feel.

Men who are at a high risk for breast cancer (such as those who have a BRCA mutation) should start doing BSEs at age 35.

It's important not to panic if you see or feel a change in your breast. Most breast changes aren't caused by cancer.

When to Do a BSE

The best time to examine your breasts is when they aren't tender or swollen. If you menstruate (get your period), you may want to wait until a few days after your period ends.

How to Do a BSE

In front of a mirror

1. Stand in front of a mirror with your breasts exposed and your hands pressing firmly down on your hips (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Standing in front of mirror

2. Look in the mirror for any of the following changes in your

breasts (see Figure 2):

- Changes in size, shape, or contour
 - Dimpling
 - Redness or scaliness of your nipple or breast skin
 - Any discharge from your nipple
3. Raise one of your arms slightly and examine that underarm. Feel that underarm for any changes or lumps. Do the same thing with your other underarm. Don't raise your arm straight up because this tightens the tissue in this area and makes it harder to examine.



Figure 2. Breast with redness and dimpling

While lying down

1. Lie down on your back and place your right arm behind your head. When you lie down, your breast tissue spreads out as thinly as possible, making it easier to feel all the tissue.
2. Use the pads of the 3 middle fingers on your left hand to feel for lumps in your right breast (see Figure 3 and 4). Move your fingers in dime-sized circles up and down your breast.

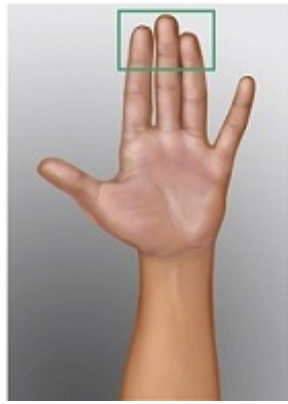


Figure 3. The pads of the 3 middle fingers of your hand



Figure 4. Breast self-exam while lying down

You'll need to use 3 different levels of pressure. Use all 3 pressure levels on each spot to feel the breast tissue before moving on to the next. If you're not sure how hard to press, talk with your doctor or nurse.

- Use light pressure to feel the tissue closest to your skin.
- Use medium pressure to feel a little deeper.
- Use firm pressure to feel the tissue closest to the chest and ribs. It's normal to feel a firm ridge in the lower curve of each breast.

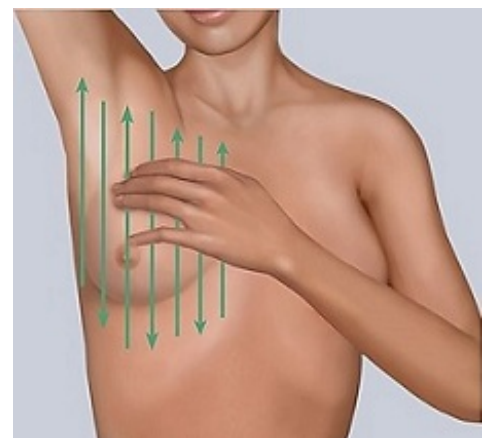


Figure 5. Using the vertical pattern to examine your breast

3. Next, examine your entire breast using an up-and-down pattern. This is sometimes called the vertical pattern (see Figure 5). Start in your underarm and move your fingers downward little by little until they reach the bottom of your rib cage. Then move your fingers slightly toward the middle and move back up until you reach your collarbone. Continue this pattern, covering your entire breast all the way to the middle of your chest bone (also called sternum or breastbone).
4. Repeat the exam on your left breast using your right hand.

If you notice any changes in your breast(s), call your doctor.

If you have any questions, contact a member of your healthcare team directly. If you're a patient at MSK and you need to reach a provider after 5:00 PM, during the weekend, or on a holiday, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

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