KNOW YOUR BREASTS

A GUIDE TO BREAST AWARENESS AND SCREENING

TOUCH LOOK CHECK™

BREAST CANCER NOW
The research & care charity

INTRODUCTION

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.

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 successful treatment is likely to 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.

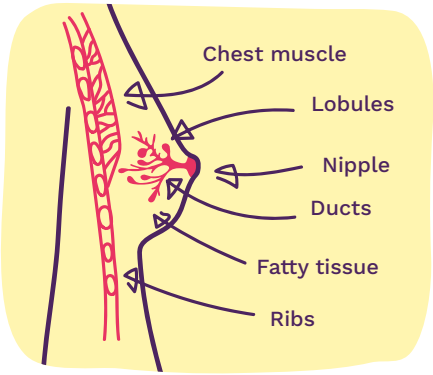
This booklet also includes information about breast screening and what this involves.

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. There is more information about men and breast cancer on our website **breastcancernow.org**

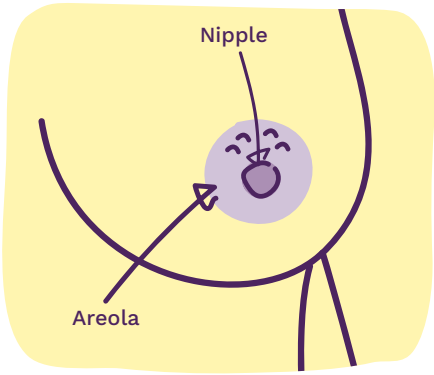
ABOUT YOUR BREASTS

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 breast condition. Benign means it's not cancer.

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. This time in a girl's life is called puberty.

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.

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.

Breast pain

Breast pain is very common in women of all ages.

Many women have breast pain around the time of their period.

Painful, sore or tender breasts can cause a lot of anxiety.

On its own, pain in the breasts is not usually a sign of breast cancer and having breast pain does not increase your risk of breast cancer.

However, it's still important to be breast aware and see your GP if the pain increases or changes.

It can be useful to keep a pain chart to see if there is any pattern to your pain.

For more information about the different types of breast pain as well as an example of a pain chart, 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.

To reduce your risk of getting intertrigo or to stop an infection getting worse:

- Wash under your breasts every morning and night with a soap substitute, such as emulsifying ointment (you can ask your pharmacist about this)
- Gently dry the skin under your breasts thoroughly after washing
- Wear a well-fitting supportive bra made from a natural material such as cotton
- Try to maintain a weight that's normal for you

You can find more information on our website at **breastcancernow.org/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.

Breast lumps

Breast lumps can have a number of different causes.

Common causes of breast lumps include:

- Breast cyst – a fluid-filled sac that can develop as the breasts change with age, more common in pre-menopausal women
- Fibroadenoma – a lump that often develops during puberty, but which can occur at any age

It's important to get any breast lumps checked by your doctor as a lump can be a sign of cancer.

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.

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 women in the UK. So whatever your age, it's important to be breast aware.

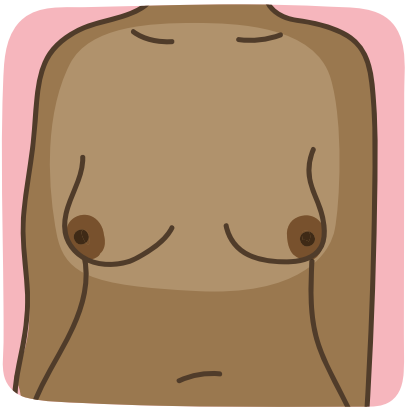
Being breast aware means getting to know how your breasts look and feel so you know what's normal for you. You'll then be more confident about noticing any unusual changes that might be a symptom of breast cancer.

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

How do I check my breasts?

Checking your breasts is as easy as TLC:

- Touch your breasts: can you feel anything new or unusual?
- Look for changes: does anything look different to you?
- Check any new or unusual changes with a GP



Check your whole breast area, including up to your collarbone (upper chest) and armpits.

Get used to looking at and feeling your breasts regularly.

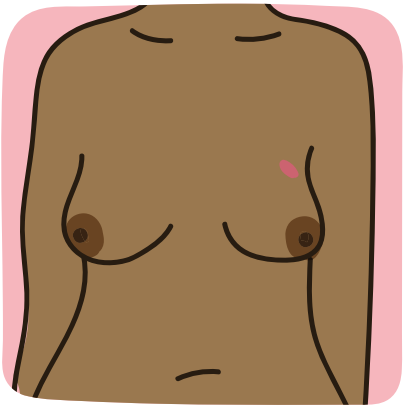
A good time to do this might be when you're in the bath or shower, using body lotion or getting dressed.

There's no special way to check your breasts and you do not need any training. Everyone will have their own way of touching and looking for changes.

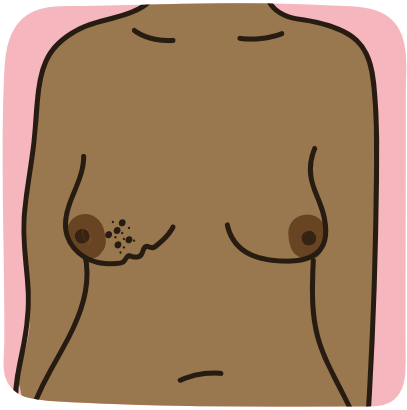
Changes to look and feel for

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.

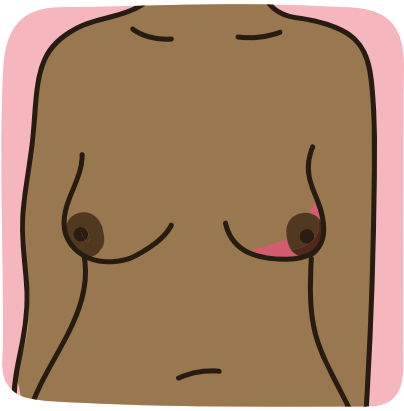
When you check your breasts, be aware of any changes that are different for you.



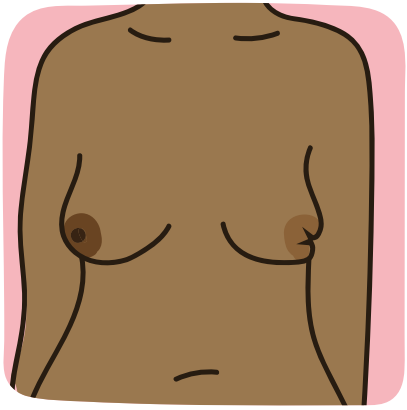
A **lump or swelling** in the breast, upper chest or armpit



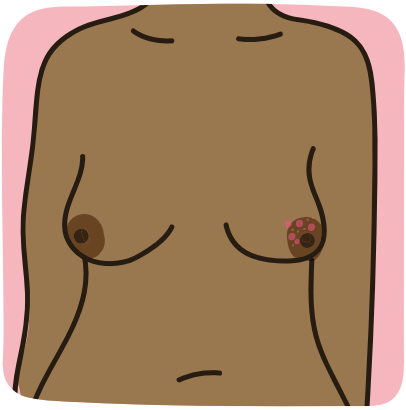
A **change to the skin**, such as puckering or dimpling



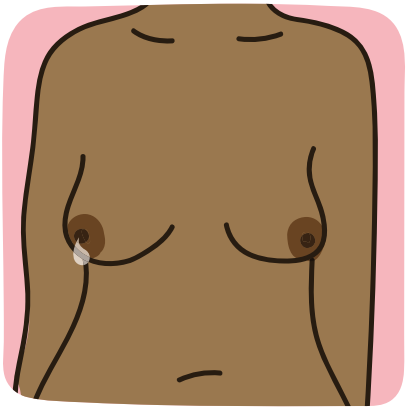
A change in the **colour** of the breast – the breast may look red or inflamed



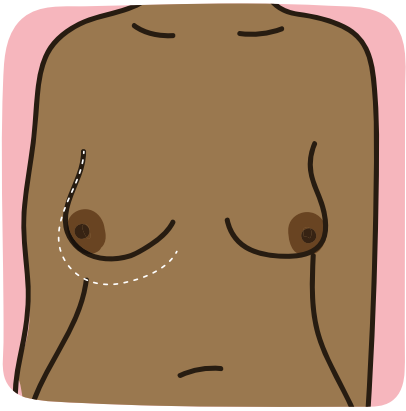
A **nipple change**, for example it has become pulled in (inverted)



Rash or crusting around the nipple



Unusual liquid (discharge) from either nipple



Changes in **size or shape** of the breast

On its own pain in your breasts is not usually a sign of cancer. But look out for pain in your breast or armpit that's there all or almost all the time.

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.

Seeing your GP

If your GP is male and you don't feel comfortable going to see him, you can ask if there's a female doctor or practice nurse 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 assessment is 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

What is breast screening?

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

The sooner breast cancer is found, the more successful treatment is likely to be.

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

Breast cancer is the most common cancer in women 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 reasons 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 aged 50 to their 71st birthday 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.

If you're 71 or over

If you're 71 or over you will not be automatically sent an invitation for screening.

However, in some parts of the UK you can continue to have breast screening every three years if you contact your local breast screening unit and ask for it. Check with your GP surgery who can put you in touch with your local breast screening clinic, or you can look them up online.

Why are women under 50 not invited for screening?

Women under 50 are not automatically invited for breast screening 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 were taking part in a trial where some women under 50 and over 70 were invited for screening. This was 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 were invited for a mammogram. The results of the trial are being looked at to see if screening would be appropriate for this age group.

If you're trans or non-binary

Some trans or non-binary people can access breast screening. Talk to your GP or gender identity clinic for more information.

Benefits of breast screening

Screening finds breast cancer early

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

The sooner breast cancer is found, the more likely it is to respond well to treatment, and the less likely you are to need more extensive surgery.

Screening prevents deaths

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

Risks of breast screening

It can be uncomfortable

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

Some women will be offered unnecessary treatment

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 treatment is offered for all breast cancers. This means some women will have treatment that may be unnecessary (known as overtreatment).

A small number of cancers are missed

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.

Being recalled can cause 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.

You're exposed to a small amount of 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 a return flight between London and Australia.

What happens during breast screening?

Your appointment will be at a breast screening unit

This might be 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.

Your mammogram will be carried out by a woman

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 remove your clothing from the waist up

You'll 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 (x-rays) 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 pictures are taken.

Taking the pictures only takes a few seconds.

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. 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 have any questions about breast screening, call our Helpline on **0808 800 6000**.

HELP US TO HELP OTHERS

If you have found this information helpful, would you consider making a donation to support our care and research work? You can donate on our website **breastcancernow.org/donate**

NOTES

ABOUT THIS BOOKLET

Know your breasts was written by Breast Cancer Now'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:
Email **health-info@breastcancernow.org**

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BREAST CANCER NOW The research & care charity

At Breast Cancer Now, we don't just fund world-class research and provide life-changing support to people affected by breast cancer.

We also highlight the importance of finding breast cancer sooner, and provide expert information on breast conditions and breast health.

Whether you're worried about breast cancer or have questions about your breasts, our nurses, expertly trained staff and award-winning information are here for you.

For support and information, call us free on **0808 800 6000** or visit **breastcancernow.org**

Breast Cancer Now

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