

Breast Cancer: Steps to Finding Breast Lumps Early

How can I find breast cancer early?

The best way to find breast lumps is to do 3 things:

- Have regular mammograms (usually every 1-2 years starting around age 40).
- Have your doctor check your breasts.
- Check your breasts yourself every month.

Doing all of these things gives you the best chance to find cancer as early as you can. Finding breast cancer early makes treatment much easier and more effective.

What is a mammogram?

A mammogram is the most effective way to find breast cancer early, up to 2 years before the lump is even large enough to feel. A mammogram is a special kind of X-ray of your breasts. The amount of radiation used in the X-ray is very small and not harmful.

Mammograms detect cancer because cancer is more dense (thicker) than the normal part of the breast. A radiologist will look at the X-rays for signs of cancer or other breast problems.

How is a mammogram performed?

Your breast will rest on a shelf and the X-ray machine will slowly press against your breast until you feel pressure. This pressure is needed to spread your breast out so that a better X-ray can be taken. The X-ray takes 1 or 2 minutes, and the entire process usually takes no more than about 20 minutes.

Do mammograms hurt?

Mammograms can be uncomfortable. But they don't take very long. You may find that planning to have your mammogram shortly after your period makes it less uncomfortable. Your breasts may be less tender at this time.

How often should I get a mammogram?

Women age 40 and over should get a mammogram every 1 to 2 years. If you have risk factors for breast cancer, such as a family history of breast cancer, your doctor may want you to have mammograms more often or start having them sooner.

How often should my doctor check my breasts?

Every 1 to 2 years beginning when you're 20. Talk with your doctor when it's time for your breasts to be checked.

How often should I check my breasts?

You should check your breasts every month beginning at about age 20. At this early age, any small lumps are probably just normal breast glands and ducts. Over time you will get used to how your breasts normally feel so that you're able to tell if a new lump appears.

Check your breasts a few days after your period (when your breasts are usually less sore). If you don't have periods or if they come at varying times, check your breasts at the same time every month.

Changes to look for in your breasts

- Any new lump (which may or may not be painful or tender)
- Unusual thickening of your breasts
- Sticky or bloody discharge from your nipples
- Any changes in the skin of your nipples or breasts, such as puckering or dimpling
- An unusual increase in the size of one breast
- One breast unusually lower than the other

How do I check for lumps?

Start by standing in front of a mirror. Look at your breasts with your arms at your side, with your arms raised behind your head, and with your arms on your hips and your chest muscles flexed.

Next, lie down with a pillow under your left shoulder. Put your left hand behind your head and feel your left breast with the pads of the 3 middle fingers on your right hand. Start at the outer edge and work around your breast in small circles, getting closer to your nipple with each circle. After you've finished checking your breast, squeeze your nipple gently and look for discharge (fluid coming out of the nipple).

Do the same thing to your right breast with a pillow under your right shoulder.

Be sure to include the area up to your collarbone and out to your armpit. You have lymph nodes in this area. Cancer can spread to lymph node tissue.