



Cells normally divide at a steady even pace, but when cells rapidly multiply they can form a lump. This lump is also known as a tumor. Tumors can be malignant (cancerous) or benign (non-cancerous). Cancer consists of a malignant tumor made up of abnormal cells. Cancer cells can invade surrounding tissue and organs, causing the cancer to spread. This is known as metastasis. When a malignant tumor starts in the breast it is called breast cancer -- even if it spreads outside the breast area. For example, if breast cancer spreads to the lungs, the proper term for it is "Metastatic Breast Cancer of the Lung" instead of "Lung Cancer". The most common site of breast cancer metastasis is in the lymph nodes. Other sites are the lungs, bones, liver and brain.

Breast cancer is the most common type of cancer in North American women. It is a leading cause of cancer-related death, second only to lung cancer. Simply being a woman and getting older puts you at risk for breast cancer. The lifetime risk of a woman developing breast cancer is 1 in every 9.

Breast cancer is more common in women past the age of 50, but it can and does occur in women of all ages. Breast cancer also affects women of all ethnic groups.

Your personal risk for developing breast cancer depends on a combination of lifestyle and personal traits known as "Risk Factors". The following risk factors are strongly related to the disease and can alert you:

- A family history of breast cancer, especially in your mother, sister or daughter.
- Age -- risk increases as your age does
- Never having borne a child
- Having your first child after age 30
- First menstrual period at an early age
- A history of benign breast disease that required biopsies

Possible Symptoms

- Breast lump or thickening. Lump is usually single, firm and most often painless
- Change in breast size or shape
- Breast or nipple tenderness, swelling, discharge or enlargement or skin retraction or dimpling
- Change in the color or feeling of breast, skin or nipple (such as scaly or reddened skin)

Early detection is your best protection. There are three exam methods that you can use. The [first method](#) is a self exam. It is important that you do your self exam once every month. The best time to do the exam is two to three days after completion of your period, when the breasts are less swollen and tender. If you are postmenopausal, pick a day of the month that is easy to remember.

Self Exam Methods

1. While in the shower, raise your right arm. Use the three finger pads of your left hand to touch every part of your right breast. Feel gently for any lumps or changes under the skin. Then raise your left arm and use the three finger pads of your right hand to examine your left breast.
2. Standing before a mirror, place your arms at your sides. Check both breasts for anything unusual - discharge, puckering, dimpling or changes in skin texture. Clasp your hands behind your head and look carefully for any changes in the shape or contour of your breasts. Gently squeeze both nipples and look for discharge.
3. Lie flat on your back with your left arm over your head and a pillow or towel under the left shoulder. Put your left hand behind your head. Use the finger pads of your first three right fingers to begin touching your breast gently but firmly. Move around your breast in a set way. Always use the same method when you do this step. Repeat this exam on the right breast using your left hand.
4. Rest your arm on a firm surface and use one of the above methods to examine the area between the breast and the underarm, and the underarm itself. All of this area is breast tissue as well.

The [second exam method](#) is a breast examination by a qualified doctor or nurse. Women ages 20 to 39 should have a clinical breast exam at least every three years. Women over 40 should have one yearly.

The [third exam method](#) is getting a mammogram. Mammography uses X-Ray technology to take a picture of the breast that may show lumps too small to detect by feel. The standard mammography examination consists of taking two x-rays of each breast, one from above and one from the side. To get the best image, the breast is first flattened between two plastic plates.

This compression may be uncomfortable, but it is not harmful to the breast and is usually not painful. Scheduling your mammogram after the menstrual period, when your breasts are less tender, will reduce the discomfort.

Remember that October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month. Early detection of breast cancer is very important. If you are not currently performing breast self exams, we encourage you to start. If you are age 40 or older, please contact your doctor about clinical breast exams and yearly mammograms.

Source: UT Cancer Center

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