Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Breast Self-Awareness and How To Do a Breast Self-Exam (BSE)

This resource explains breast self-awareness and how to do a breast self-exam (BSE).

About breast self-awareness

Breast self-awareness means being familiar with how your breasts normally look and feel. People of all genders can get breast cancer. No matter what gender you are, you can do a BSE.

Everyone 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 (fluid) from your nipple, call your doctor. It's important not to panic though. Most breast changes are not caused by cancer.

One way you can be aware of how your breasts look and feel is by doing a breast self-exam. MSK does not recommend doing a BSE as part of routine breast cancer screening. This is because studies show they do not help find breast cancer or help people live longer.

You may still choose to do a BSE to be familiar with your breasts, however. You can do a BSE once a month, once in a while, or not at all. If you choose not to do a BSE, that's OK. But you should still make sure you know how your breasts normally look and feel.

When to do a breast self-exam

The best time to examine your breasts is when they are not 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 breast self-exam

In front of a mirror

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

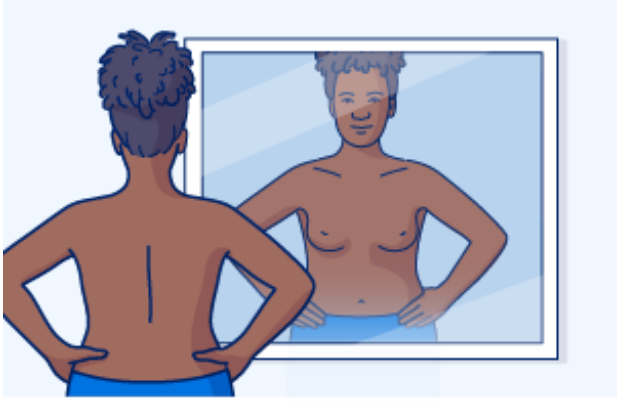


Figure 1. Standing in front of mirror

2. Look in the mirror for any of these changes in your breasts (see Figure 2):

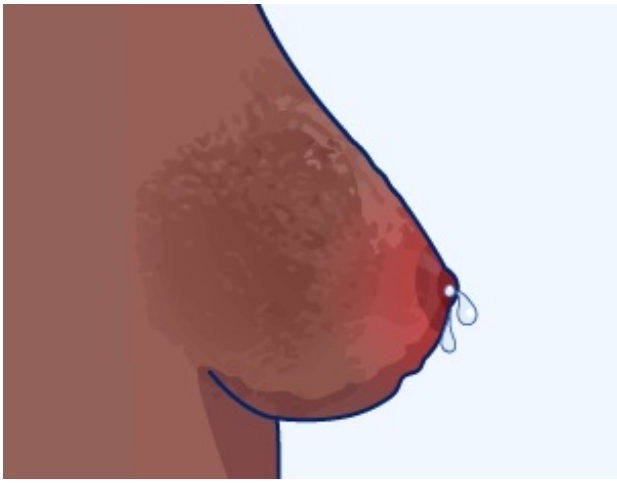


Figure 2. Breast with redness and dimpling

- Changes in size, shape, or contour
- Dimpling (like the texture of an orange) of your breast skin
- Redness or scaliness (flaking or crusting) of your nipple or breast skin
- Any discharge (fluid) 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. Do not raise your arm straight up. Doing this tightens the tissue in this area and makes it harder to examine.

While lying down

1. Lie down on your back with a small pillow or a folded towel under your right shoulder. Raise your right arm behind your head. When you lie down, your breast tissue spreads out as thinly as possible. This makes it easier for you 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 Figures 3 and 4). Move your fingers in dime-sized circles up and down your breast while applying pressure. You can move your fingers in clockwise (to the right) or counterclockwise (to the left) circles.

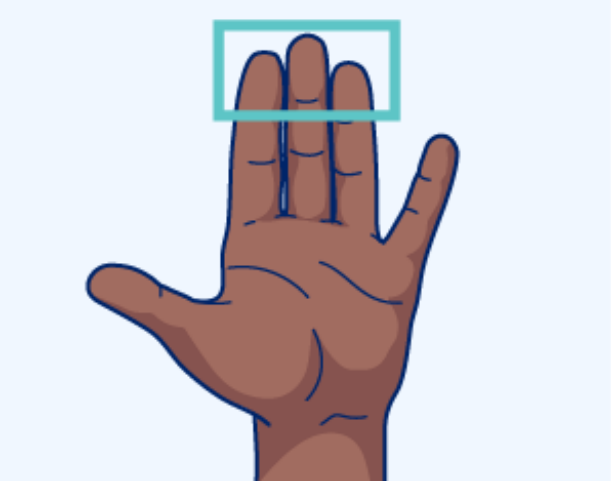


Figure 3. The pads of your 3 middle fingers



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.

- 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 your chest and ribs. It's normal to feel thicker tissue or a ridge of firm tissue under the lower curve of each breast.

3. Next, examine your whole 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 over slightly toward the middle and move back up until you reach your collarbone. Keep moving your fingers in this up-and-down pattern across your whole breast. You can stop when you reach the middle of your chest bone (also called your sternum or breastbone).

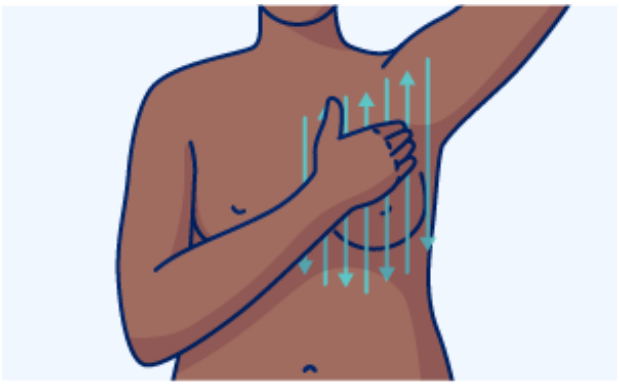


Figure 5. Using the vertical pattern to examine your breast

4. Repeat the exam on your left breast using your right hand.

If you notice any changes in your breasts, call your doctor.

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

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

Breast Self-Awareness and How To Do a Breast Self-Exam (BSE) - Last updated on August 25, 2026
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