



How to examine your breasts

Breast self-examination (BSE) is an important part of taking care of yourself. It can help you detect problems at an early stage.

You should do BSE at least once a month. This will help you become familiar with the usual appearance and feel of your breasts. Doing BSE regularly will make it easier to notice when anything has changed. If you find any change, let your doctor know.

When is the best time to do BSE?

The best time to perform BSE is 2-3 days after your menstrual period ends. This is when your breasts are least likely to be tender or swollen. If you do the exam late in your cycle, your breasts may feel lumpy.

If you no longer menstruate, pick a day—like the first of the month—and do BSE on the same day each month.

Step by step

1. Stand in front of a mirror. Look at both breasts as you raise your arms over your head. Do you see anything unusual? A discharge from the nipple? Does the skin of the breast look any different—do you see any puckering, dimpling, or scaling? Any change in color?

2. Watching closely in the mirror, clasp your hands behind your head and press your hands forward. You should feel your chest muscles tighten. Check to see if there is anything different in the shape of your breasts.

3. Put your hands on your hips, press down firmly, and lean slightly toward the mirror as you move your elbows and shoulders forward. Again, look for any changes in the shape of your breasts.

4. You can do this next step in the shower. Raise your left arm. Use the pads of three fingers of your right hand, and explore your left breast firmly, carefully, and thoroughly. You want to feel for any unusual lump under the skin.

Start at the outer edge of the breast and press with the tips of your fingers, moving your hand in small circles. Move the circles slowly

To examine your breast, start with light pressure, then spiral downward and deeper into the tissue.

A detailed illustration of a woman with long dark hair, lying on her back. She is propping herself up on her left arm, with her right arm raised above her head. Her right hand is placed on her right breast, fingers spread. An inset circular image shows a close-up of a hand with fingers spread, illustrating the technique for examining the breast.

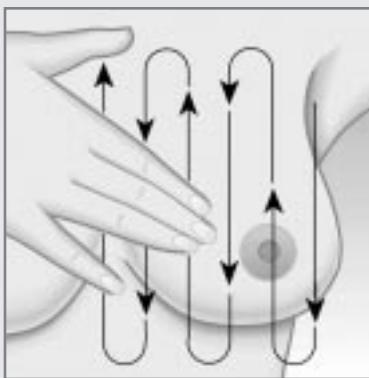
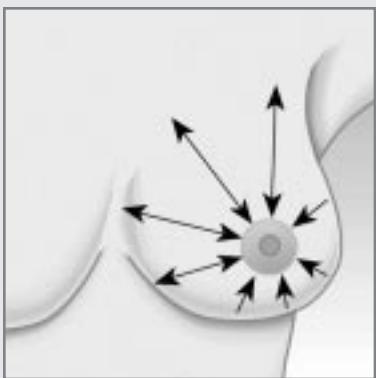
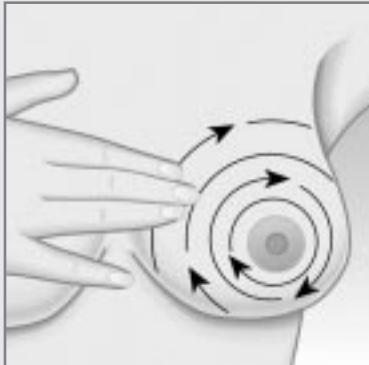
ILLUSTRATIONS: BARBARA COUSINS

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continued



To perform a self-exam, use the pads of your three middle fingers. Examine your breasts in a regular pattern that is comfortable for you—wedges, circles, or vertical or horizontal lines. When moving your hand from one area of the breast to another, always overlap the area previously checked.

around the breast and gradually work in toward the nipple. Be sure to cover the entire breast, and be sure to feel the area over your nipple, too. Also cover the area between the breast and armpit, and the armpit itself.

Then raise your right arm, and repeat the exam on your right breast.

5. Gently squeeze each nipple. Is there any discharge?

6. Repeat steps 4 and 5 while lying flat on your back. Tuck your left arm

under your head, and put a pillow or towel under your left shoulder. This flattens your breast and makes it easier to examine. Use the same circular motion described earlier.

If you do find a lump, feel it. Is it smooth or rough? Spongy or hard? Does it move easily, or does it seem to stick to the tissue around it? Your doctor will want to know these details. Be sure to tell your doctor any time you find anything that feels different from the way it felt before. □