

# Know your breasts

## A guide to breast awareness and screening

breast  
cancer  
care

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. It includes information on breast screening.





**This information is by Breast Cancer Care.**

**We are the only specialist UK-wide charity that supports people affected by breast cancer and concerned about breast health.**

We offer reliable information and personal support, over the phone and online, from nurses and people who've been there.

We highlight the importance of early detection and we're here to answer your questions about breast health and breast cancer.

For care, support and information, call us free on **0808 800 6000** or visit **[breastcancercare.org.uk](https://www.breastcancercare.org.uk)**

The logo for Breast Cancer Care, featuring the words "breast", "cancer", and "care" stacked vertically in a lowercase, rounded font. "breast" and "cancer" are in pink, and "care" is in orange.



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## Introduction

This booklet will help you to be breast aware so that you feel more confident about noticing any breast changes that are unusual for you and going to see your GP (local doctor) about them.

Most breast changes aren't because of breast cancer, but the sooner breast cancer is diagnosed, the more effective treatment may be.

This booklet includes information on breast screening and what this involves. Women between 50 and 70 are invited for a routine mammogram (a breast x-ray) every three years as part of a national breast screening programme.

Although the booklet is for women, men also need to be aware of any changes in their chest area as around 340 men in the UK get breast cancer each year.

If you care for someone with learning disabilities, you may want to use our information resources about breast awareness designed to help people with learning disabilities with the support of their carer.

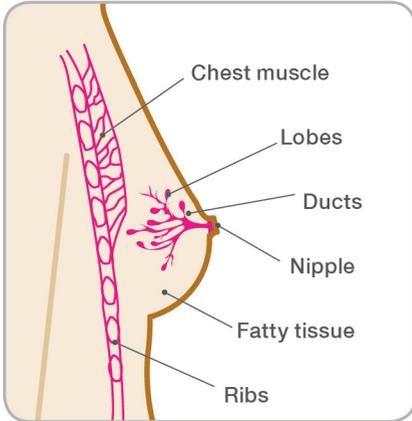
You can find these on our website at

[breastcancercare.org.uk/learning-disabilities](https://breastcancercare.org.uk/learning-disabilities)

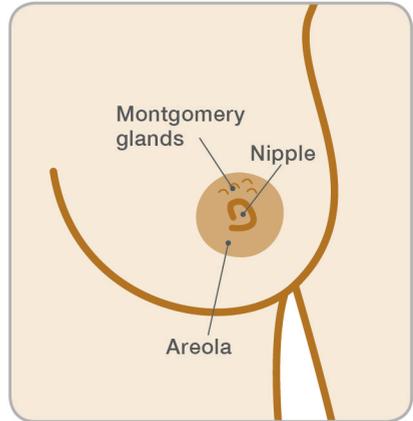
# About your breasts

Breasts are made up of glandular, fibrous and fatty tissue. They sit on the front of the chest and extend up into the armpit.

## The breast



## The nipple



The glandular tissue contains lobes, with many smaller lobules inside each one. The lobules are the milk-producing glands. When milk is produced by the breasts to feed a baby (lactation), breast milk is carried through tubes (called ducts) to the nipple ready for breastfeeding.

The darker area of skin around the nipple is called the areola. On the areola there are some small raised bumps called Montgomery glands. They produce fluid to moisturise the nipple.

# Normal breast changes

Your breasts change constantly throughout your life from puberty, through adolescence, the reproductive years and then the menopause (when periods stop permanently). This is because levels of the female hormones oestrogen and progesterone in your body change at different times in your life.

## 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.

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.

Lumpiness or tenderness are common at this time. Lumps at this age often turn out to be a fibroadenoma, a benign (not cancer) breast condition. A fibroadenoma has a rubbery texture, is smooth to the touch and moves easily under the skin. For more information see our **Fibroadenoma** leaflet.

## 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.

Many women also have breast pain around the time of their period (cyclical breast pain), which is normal. For more information see our **Breast pain** booklet.

## During pregnancy

Breast changes can be an early sign of being pregnant. 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.

For more information see our **Breast changes during and after pregnancy** booklet.

## Before, during and after the menopause

From around the mid-30s onwards the breasts begin to age and the glandular and fibrous tissue begins to disappear and is gradually replaced by fatty tissue.

As oestrogen levels fall during and after the menopause, the breasts may change size, lose their firmness, feel softer and may droop. Changes such as a lump or tenderness are common at this time.

Lumps before or during the menopause often turn out to be breast cysts (fluid-filled sacs). For more information see our **Breast cysts** leaflet.

Tenderness may be due to non-cyclical breast pain (pain that is not linked to the menstrual cycle), which may need to be treated with pain relief. For more information, see our **Breast pain** booklet.

It's important to see your GP (local doctor) about any changes that are new for you, even though for most women these will not be cancer.

## Common breast problems

Most breast changes are likely to be normal or due to a benign (not cancer) breast condition. Some benign breast conditions may cause problems and need treatment, but this is not always the case.

For example, breast pain linked to your periods is very common and usually regarded as normal. However, you should talk to your GP if it's severe and long lasting. You can also find out more in our **Breast pain** booklet.

Soreness under the breast is common, especially in women with large breasts. It usually happens when skin folds rub together causing friction and trapping moisture. This is called intertrigo and can happen anywhere on the body where skin rubs against skin. If it is severe, treatment may be needed. There are some simple things you can do to reduce your risk of getting intertrigo and stop any infection from getting worse. You can find more information about intertrigo on our website at [breastcancercare.org.uk/intertrigo](https://breastcancercare.org.uk/intertrigo)

There are many other benign breast conditions that can cause breast changes, such as duct ectasia and intraductal papilloma. You can find out more about these on our website or in our booklets.

### Wearing a well-fitting bra

A woman's breasts change size and shape many times during her life, due to the menstrual cycle, pregnancy and breastfeeding, the menopause and putting on or losing weight. Wearing a well-fitting bra can help if you are feeling any discomfort or back pain. For more information see our leaflet **Your guide to a well-fitting bra**.

## Being breast aware

Whatever your age, size or shape, it's important to take care of your breasts. Breast cancer is the most common cancer in the UK, so look after your breasts by being breast aware.

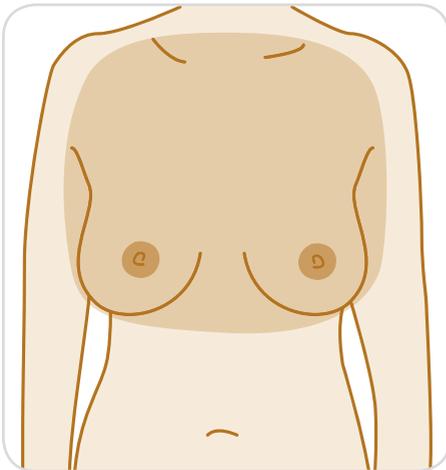
Being breast aware means getting to know how your breasts look and feel so you know what is normal for you. You will then be more confident about noticing any unusual changes that might be a symptom of breast cancer.

If you notice a change, even if you feel well, it's important to visit your GP. Some people think that having breast cancer will cause other symptoms apart from a breast change, such as feeling tired, having less energy or losing weight, but this isn't the case.

## How do I check my breasts?

Try to get used to looking at and feeling your breasts regularly – for instance, when you are in the bath or shower, using body lotion or getting dressed. You don't need to feel your breasts in any special way. If you check them as part of your usual routine you won't need to worry that you aren't doing it often enough. Decide what you are comfortable with and what suits you best.

Remember to check all parts of your breasts, your armpits and up to your collarbone.



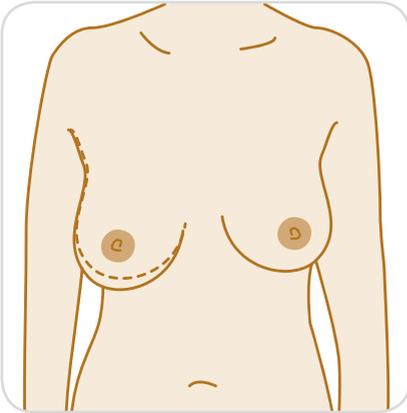
## The Breast Cancer Care checklist

- Look at and feel your breasts so you know what's normal for you.
- Do this regularly to check for changes.
- Tell your doctor as soon as possible if you notice a change.

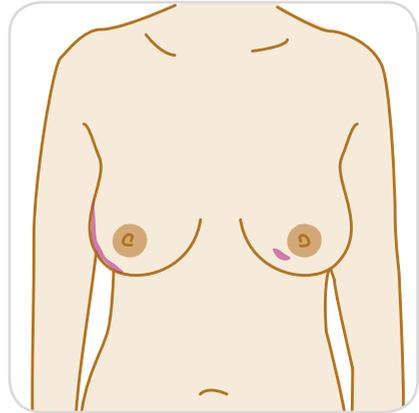
## What changes should I look and feel for?

Everyone's breasts look and feel different. Some people 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.

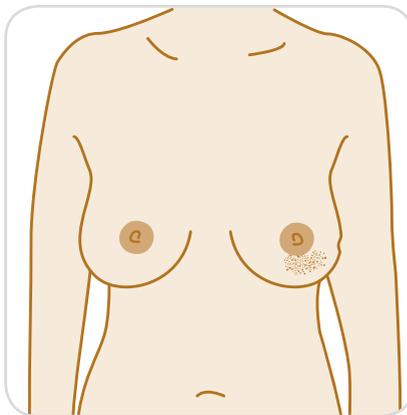
When you check your breasts, try to be aware of any changes that are different for you. The next pages show what these could be.



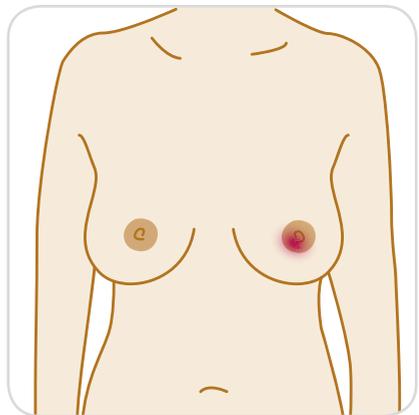
A change in **size** or **shape**



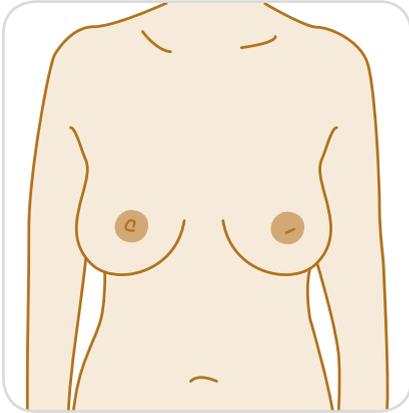
A **lump** or **area** that feels thicker than the rest of the breast



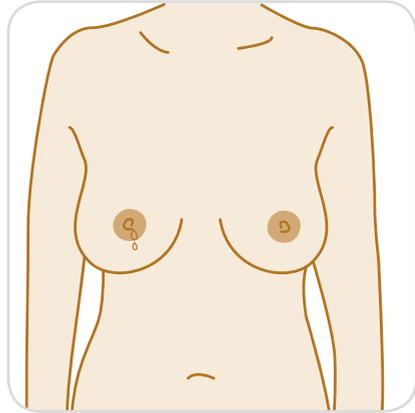
A change in **skin texture** such as puckering or dimpling (like the skin of an orange)



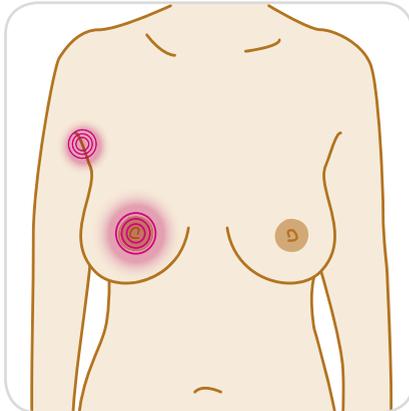
**Redness** or a **rash** on the skin and/or around the nipple



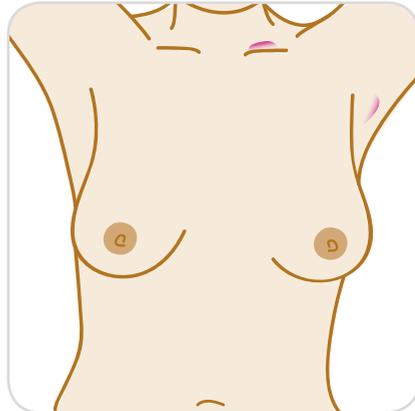
Your **nipple** has become pulled in or looks different, for example a change in its position or shape



**Liquid** that comes from the nipple without squeezing



**Pain** in your breast or your armpit that's there all or almost all the time



A **swelling** in your armpit or around your collarbone

## What should I do if I find a change?

You know better than anyone how your breasts look and feel normally so if you notice a change, go and 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 is causing the change.

If your GP is male and you don't feel comfortable going to see him, you can ask if there's a female doctor 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 tests are 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 **Your breast clinic appointment** booklet.

# Breast screening

Routine breast screening can pick up breast cancer before there are any signs or symptoms. It uses a test called a mammogram (a breast x-ray) to look for cancer that may be too small to see or feel. The sooner breast cancer is diagnosed, the more effective treatment is likely to be.

Breast cancer is the most common cancer in the UK, affecting 1 in 8 women during their lifetime. The number of people diagnosed each year is rising. However, death (mortality) from breast cancer is falling. This is because of a number of factors such as earlier diagnosis, improved and newer treatments and patients taking part in clinical trials. It may also be due to breast screening.

## Who is invited for screening?

In the UK, women between 50 and 70 are invited for a routine mammogram every three years as part of a national breast screening programme.

To be invited for screening you have to be registered with a GP. The screening service takes the names from your GP's list and you'll be sent an appointment to come for a mammogram. This may not happen the year you turn 50, but it will happen by the time you are 53.

Women under 50 are not invited for routine breast screening. This is because the number of women who get breast cancer is much lower in this age group: 81% of breast cancers occur in women over the age of 50 and the risk continues to increase with age. Also, younger women's breast tissue can be dense, which can make the x-ray image less clear. This makes normal changes, benign breast conditions and cancer harder to find.

If you're over 70 you won't be sent an invitation for screening. However, you can continue to have breast screening every three years if you ask for it. Your GP surgery can put you in touch with your local breast screening clinic or you can look them up online:

**Scotland**

[nsd.scot.nhs.uk/services/screening/breastscreening](http://nsd.scot.nhs.uk/services/screening/breastscreening)

**Wales**

[breasttestwales.wales.nhs.uk/contact-us](http://breasttestwales.wales.nhs.uk/contact-us)

**England**

[nhs.uk/Service-Search/Breast-screening-services/LocationSearch/325](http://nhs.uk/Service-Search/Breast-screening-services/LocationSearch/325)

**Northern Ireland**

[cancerscreening.hscni.net](http://cancerscreening.hscni.net)

### Age extension trial

In England, some breast screening clinics are taking part in a trial where the age range has been extended to invite a number of women before the age of 50 (47–49) and after the age of 70 (71–73) to see if it would be beneficial to extend the age range for all women in the future.

If you want to find out more about the age extension trial, visit Public Health England's website at [gov.uk/government/publications/nhs-breast-screening-age-extension-trial](http://gov.uk/government/publications/nhs-breast-screening-age-extension-trial)

### Breast screening for women with a significant family history

Most breast cancers are not inherited and so do not increase the lifetime risk for other family members. However, a small number of women have an increased risk of breast cancer because they have a significant family history and may be offered breast screening earlier and more frequently.

For more information see our **Breast cancer in families** booklet.

## Is breast screening reliable?

Mammograms are the most reliable way of detecting a breast cancer sooner but, like other screening tests, they're not 100% reliable. For example, not all breast cancers can be seen on a mammogram, some breast cancers are very difficult to see or, very occasionally, the doctors reading the mammogram may miss the cancer, no matter how experienced they are.

## Review of breast screening

In 2012, a report was published following an independent review of the National Health Service Breast Screening Programme (NHSBSP). The review looked at the benefits and risks of attending the NHSBSP.

Below is information on the benefits and risks of breast screening. You can read more about the independent review on Cancer Research UK's website [cancerresearchuk.org](http://cancerresearchuk.org)

The review showed breast screening prevented 1,300 deaths from breast cancer a year.

### What are the possible benefits of breast screening?

Going for breast screening will not prevent a breast cancer from developing, but it can find a breast cancer sooner – before it can be seen or felt.

Invasive breast cancers (breast cancer that has the potential to spread to other parts of the body) found through screening are more likely to be found earlier and respond very well to treatment. This means a mastectomy (removal of all the breast tissue including the nipple area) and chemotherapy is not always needed.

### What are the possible risks of breast screening?

Having a mammogram can be uncomfortable for some women and can cause a lot of worry before an appointment. However, not all women find having a mammogram uncomfortable and each mammogram only takes a few seconds (see 'What happens at a routine breast screening appointment?' opposite).

Having a screening mammogram every three years for 20 years means being exposed to a small amount of radiation. This can very slightly increase your risk of developing breast cancer in the future. However, the amount of radiation you are exposed to is very low (you'd receive

a similar amount from flying between London and Australia and back). The dose is monitored and adjusted according to the person's individual situation. This ensures that the dose remains as low as possible while still providing a good-quality image.

Some cancers diagnosed through breast screening may not develop any further or may grow so slowly that they would never cause any harm during a woman's life. At the moment it's not possible for doctors to tell which cancers can be left alone, so all cancers are treated. This means that some women will be given treatment they don't need. This is the main risk of screening. The NHSBSP review found that for every woman whose death was prevented by screening there would be around three women treated for breast cancer that wouldn't have become life threatening.

Sometimes an area of concern that needs further investigations, and possibly an operation, will turn out to be benign. This can cause anxiety as well as being painful and uncomfortable.

## Staying breast aware between mammograms

Having screening mammograms cannot prevent breast cancer. It is also possible for breast cancer to develop in between each three yearly mammogram. This is called an interval cancer. That's why it's important to continue to be breast aware and report any changes to your GP even if you've had a mammogram recently.

If you would like to discuss breast screening, call our Helpline on **0808 800 6000**.

## What happens at a routine breast screening appointment?

Breast screening usually takes place at a breast screening clinic, but some areas will invite you to a mobile unit.

First, you'll be asked to complete a questionnaire. It will ask about any ongoing medical conditions, if you're taking hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and if you've had any breast problems. Then a female mammography practitioner (an expert in taking breast x-rays) will explain what will happen and answer any questions you have.

The mammography practitioner will ask you to undress to the waist and stand in front of the mammogram machine. If you're pregnant or think you may be pregnant, tell the mammography practitioner.

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 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 will need to stay in position while the x-ray is taken.

The results of your screening mammogram are sent by post to you and your GP. Some women will be sent a letter asking them to come back for further assessment. It will explain if another mammogram is needed because of technical reasons (if the image is unclear) or if further tests are needed to assess a change seen on the mammogram. This doesn't necessarily mean that you have breast cancer, just that further tests are needed to find out what it is. For more information see our **Your breast clinic appointment** booklet.

# Can I reduce my risk of breast cancer?

The exact causes of breast cancer are not known, but we do know that being female and getting older are the main risk factors.

Looking after your general health may help to reduce your risk of breast cancer slightly. This includes:

- eating a well-balanced diet with plenty of fruit and vegetables and limiting your intake of saturated fats
- maintaining a healthy weight, especially after the menopause
- doing regular exercise
- not drinking alcohol or not drinking more than the recommended weekly amount (for more information see [nhs.uk/Change4Life/Pages/alcohol-lower-risk-guidelines-units.aspx](http://nhs.uk/Change4Life/Pages/alcohol-lower-risk-guidelines-units.aspx)).

There is more information about breast cancer and risk on our website at [breastcancercare.org.uk/reduce-my-risk](http://breastcancercare.org.uk/reduce-my-risk)

# We're here for you: help us to be there for other people too

If you found this booklet helpful, please use this form to send us a donation. Our information resources and other services are only free because of support from people such as you.

We want to be there for every person facing the emotional and physical trauma of a breast cancer diagnosis. Donate today and together we can ensure that everyone affected by breast cancer has someone to turn to.

## Donate by post

Please accept my donation of **£10/£20/my own choice of £**

I enclose a cheque/PO/CAF voucher made payable to  
**Breast Cancer Care**

## Donate online

You can give using a debit or credit card at  
**[www.breastcancercare.org.uk/donate](http://www.breastcancercare.org.uk/donate)**

## My details

Name \_\_\_\_\_

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\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Postcode \_\_\_\_\_

Email address \_\_\_\_\_

We might occasionally want to send you more information about our services and activities

- Please tick if you're happy to receive email from us
- Please tick if you don't want to receive post from us

We won't pass on your details to any other organisation or third parties.

Please return this form to Breast Cancer Care, Freepost RRRKZ-ARZY-YCKG,  
5-13 Great Suffolk Street, London SE1 0NS



# About this booklet

**Know your breasts: a guide to breast awareness and screening** was written by Breast Cancer Care's clinical specialists, and reviewed by healthcare professionals and people affected by breast cancer.



For a full list of the sources we used to research it:

Phone **0345 092 0808**

Email **[publications@breastcancercare.org.uk](mailto:publications@breastcancercare.org.uk)**



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Breast Cancer Care doesn't just support people affected by breast cancer. We also highlight the importance of early detection and answer your questions about breast health. Our publications and website provide up-to-date, expert information on breast conditions and looking after your breasts.

If you have a breast cancer or breast health query contact our Helpline on **0808 800 6000** or visit **[breastcancercare.org.uk](https://breastcancercare.org.uk)**

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