



## Breast Health

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Women often tell us that they really don't know "what they should know" about breast health. Hopefully this handout will shed some light on the subject!

### **What does a healthy set of breasts look like?**

Healthy breasts have a few common characteristics. Firstly, no two breasts are the same; so it is common for most women to have 2 breasts that are 2 different sizes.

Healthy breasts are made up of fatty tissue- so they should feel pliable and soft. Fat tissue isn't perky; it's floppy and jiggly; so expect the healthy breast to sag under the effects of gravity, and wiggle when you jiggle. It's what fat does!

Nipples come in all shapes, sizes, and colors. Some nipples poke out, some nipples are flat, and other nipples are even pulled inward. Some nipples are small; others are large. They come in pink, beige, brown, black – in fact, your nipple color can even change under the influence of hormones!. Some nipples point up, others point down; some even point in different directions. All of this is normal nipple behavior.

Speaking of nipples, sometimes breast discharge is normal; especially if you have previously breastfed. Milky discharge can be a very normal thing. If you are constantly expressing a milky discharge, you are actually causing your body to make more (so if you don't like it, don't extract it!).

The areola (the area that surrounds the nipple) is another area that can come in many shapes, colors, and size. There are also some glands that are part of the areola; so if your areola have areas that look like little tiny bumps on the surface of the skin, you are very normal.

### **Do you know your breasts?**

One of the keys to detecting breast problems early, is when a woman does her own breast exam. You should get to know how your breasts feel so that you can detect problems early. This does not mean that you need to know WHAT you are feeling FOR. You just need to know how YOUR breasts NORMALLY feel, so if something new crops up, you will recognize that it is new, and you can ask a professional to evaluate it.

It's sort of like when the secret service trains their men to recognize counterfeit money; they don't teach them the latest and greatest counterfeit techniques, NO, they teach them what the real thing looks and feels like so when a bad bill comes along, it can be recognized!

### **When is the best time to check my breasts?**

It's good practice to check your breasts about the same time each month in relation to your menstrual cycle. The best time to do the exam is about 3-5 days after your period has stopped. If you don't get a period, check your breasts the same day each month. If you are always checking your breasts about the same time each month, generally speaking, you can ward off being worried by normal variations that hormone changes may bring along.

### **Who else is good at feeling breasts?**

More men find breast lumps in their partners! Who else better to help you with your monthly exam, than someone who knows how your tissue feels! Don't hesitate to ask your partner for help if you think they would be helpful!

### **How do I do a breast exam?**

A great place for a breast exam is in the shower with soapy hands. The slipperiness allows you to feel deep below the surface of the skin; where most troublesome problems exist.

Start by looking at your breasts. Place your hands on your hips and push in (contracting your chest muscles). Do your breasts look normal? The breasts should look somewhat symmetrical. The skin should not pull nor pucker. There should be no visible signs of abnormality (see below).

Next, with sudsy slippery fingers, use the pad of your fingers (not the tip of your fingers) to feel the tissue of your breasts. Start in the center of your breast. Work your fingers in a circular pattern while you feel the outside of your skin, slightly deeper into the tissue, and ultimately, as deeply as you can feel. Work your way out and around the breasts, using a circular motion until you have covered the entire

breast. Then, feel up into the armpit, across the chest, and a full hand-width below your breasts across your chest wall. There are breast tissues in all of these places!

As you get to know how your breasts feel month after month, you will start to recognize the differences in how your tissue feels. The most important thing to report is if something that you feel begins to change. This means, if suddenly something small gets big, or if something once moveable, stays anchored and doesn't move any longer; or maybe, something that was once non-tender, suddenly hurts..... No matter what the change; if it changes, report it!

## **What are the warning signs of an abnormal breast?**

There are a few warning signs that should never be ignored. They are:

1. A new lump in your breast or armpit
2. Thickening or swelling of part of your breast
3. Irritation or dimpling of breast skin
4. Redness or flaking skin in the nipple area
5. Pulling in of, or pain of the nipples
6. Nipple discharge that is bloody or clear
7. Breast tissue that looks dimpled like the peel of an orange or lemon
8. Red streaks running across the breast skin
9. Veins that suddenly take an abnormal appearance, cluster, or widen across a particular part of the breast
10. Breast pain
11. Erosion of the skin of the breast, areola, or nipple
12. Tender, or enlarged lymph nodes of the armpit or along the clavicle
13. A breast that suddenly takes a new shape or direction

If you experience any of these abnormal signs, you should schedule a clinical breast exam with your local women's health provider. Ask specifically to have the area evaluated, and ask for a breast ultrasound or diagnostic mammogram.

## **Are there any factors that can change my breasts?**

If you drink caffeine, or if you smoke, this can make your breasts have a different texture from day to day. Also, your period, or other hormonal fluctuations can make your breasts feel different.

## **Is there anything else I need to know?**

Be sure to get your mammogram if you are 40 years old. You should ask for a mammogram once a year at your annual health check up after the age of 40. If you have a strong family history of breast cancer (a sister, a mother, a maternal grandmother or maternal aunt who had breast cancer) you may ask for a more sensitive test, that includes the use of MRI to examine the breast. Ask your health

care provider for more information.

## **One Last Thing:**

DON'T SMOKE! It's horrible for your breast health! REALLY! Ask your healthcare provider to help you stop smoking if you currently are a smoker, It will be the best thing you ever did for health. QUIT TODAY!