



NATIONAL
BREAST
CANCER
FOUNDATION, INC.®

***MOST ASKED
QUESTIONS***

Breast Cancer Signs & Symptoms

ANSWERED BY
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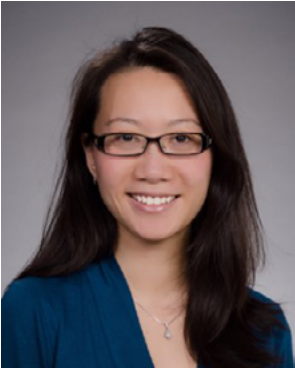
The purpose of a screening examination such as a [mammogram](#) is to catch cancer early before symptoms start. However, there are [signs and symptoms of breast cancer](#) which are important to know about to be proactive about your health. Any time a symptom or abnormality such as a new [lump](#) or a skin change is found, it should be looked at by a healthcare professional.

This guide will help you know what signs and symptoms to look for and help you take note of important information to share with your healthcare provider. The questions in this guide were collected from NBCF community members. The answers are provided by breast imaging radiologist, Diana L. Lam, M.D.

Remember: It is vitally important for women age 40 and over of average risk to receive a screening mammogram once a year. Some women at increased risk of developing breast cancer may begin receiving mammograms before the age of 40. Speak with your healthcare provider to determine the screening schedule that is best for you. Adult women of all ages should perform a monthly breast self-exam to be proactive about their breast health.

Note: The statements in this eBook have been provided by a medical professional. However, each person's case and situation is unique. Therefore, it is important for you to follow up with your healthcare provider if you are experiencing any of the signs or symptoms listed in this eBook, or are experiencing any other breast or health concerns.

About Diana L. Lam, M.D.

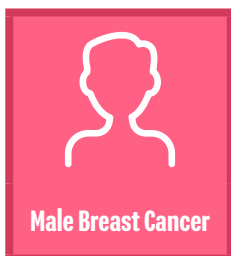
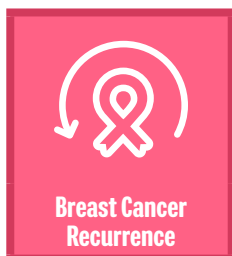
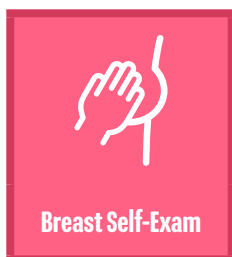


Dr. Lam is a physician at the University of Washington/Fred Hutchinson Cancer Center and a University of Washington Associate Professor of Radiology. She is the clinical director of the Breast Imaging Clinic at the University of Washington-Northwest Campus. Her clinical practice includes all aspects of breast imaging, including

mammography, ultrasound, MRI, tomosynthesis, and breast interventional procedures. As a breast imager, she specializes in using evidence-based, state-of-the-art technology for the early detection and optimal treatment of breast cancer. She believes in actively engaging patients in their care through education, clear communication, and supporting their individual values. She is dedicated to providing compassionate care to all her patients. Dr. Lam is also a member of NBCF's Medical Advisory Council.

FAQ Categories

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Breast Self-Awareness

Having breast self-awareness means that you are familiar and aware of the way your breasts normally look and feel. Visual and physical self-exams, such as through a [breast self-exam](#), can help you develop breast self-awareness. Knowing how your breasts normally look and feel will help you find any changes in your breasts that should be reported to your healthcare professional promptly.

While most breast cancer does not cause any signs or symptoms in its early stages, it is important to be familiar with the [signs and symptoms of breast cancer](#). You should see your healthcare provider about any of these symptoms.

If you discover a [breast lump](#), any other new finding or change in your breast, or experience any other signs or symptoms of breast cancer, schedule an appointment with your doctor. But don't panic—[most lumps are not a sign of breast cancer](#).

Frequently Asked Questions

Signs and Symptoms

What are the most common signs and symptoms of breast cancer?

While most breast cancer does not cause any signs or symptoms in its early stages, there are several red flags to look out for. [Signs and symptoms of breast cancer](#) may include:

- A new lump or thickening in or near the breast or in the underarm area
- Any unexplained change in the size or shape of the breast, including swelling or shrinkage (especially if on one side only)
- Dimpling anywhere on the breast
- Puckering in the skin of the breast
- A nipple turned inward (inverted) into the breast
- Discharge (fluid) from the nipple (particularly clear or bloody discharge)
- A change in the skin texture, discoloration, swelling, or an enlargement of pores in the skin of the breast (some describe this as similar to an orange peel's texture)
- Scaly, red, or swollen skin on the breast, nipple, or areola
- Recent asymmetry (unequal or lack of sameness) of the breasts

If you notice any of the above symptoms, talk to your doctor immediately. Fill out [this worksheet](#) to help you discuss these changes with your healthcare team.

When do symptoms of breast cancer start?

It is important to remember that most early-stage breast cancer has no symptoms at all. This is why annual screening mammograms are so important—they can identify breast cancer in its earliest stages, before any symptoms appear. However, if you are experiencing any [signs and symptoms of breast cancer](#) at any time, see your healthcare professional for further evaluation. They may need to order diagnostic imaging, such as a special diagnostic mammogram and possibly a breast ultrasound.

Can symptoms of breast cancer come and go?

Breast cancer symptoms generally do not come and go. A special type of breast cancer, [inflammatory breast cancer](#), can present very similarly to infection or mastitis of the breast. These symptoms may slightly improve with antibiotics, but will not completely go away. If you have symptoms of infection, such as redness, swelling, or warmth of your breast, it is important that you are evaluated by a healthcare provider and followed until your symptoms resolve.

Is breast pain or breast tenderness a sign of breast cancer?

There are many conditions that may cause [breast pain](#) and tenderness, including normal monthly hormone fluctuations. Breast pain that is more diffuse (widespread), located in both breasts, and comes and goes is typically due to these hormonal changes. It is rare for breast cancer to present as pure breast pain; however, breast pain that is focal (in one spot) and constant should be evaluated by a healthcare professional.

If I find a lump, does that mean I have breast cancer?

[Not all breast lumps are breast cancer.](#) It is very common to have lumps or masses in the breasts which are normal and are not breast cancer. But if you find a new lump or mass or there are changes (the lump is getting larger in size), you should contact your healthcare professional to get it evaluated.

Does breast cancer always appear as a lump?

Breast cancer does not always appear as a [lump](#). Breast cancer may feel and look different from one person to another. It is important for women to get regular screening mammograms so cancer can be found when it is very small, before a lump can be felt.

What does breast cancer actually feel like?

Most women currently diagnosed with breast cancer may not actually feel the cancer in their breast. This is because tumors that may have been seen on a screening exam are too small to be felt. However, when a breast cancer tumor is large enough to be felt, it can be a mass or lump which is hard (like a frozen pea), fixed (doesn't move around), and continues to grow in size. Skin changes such as dimpling, redness, or bloody nipple discharge are also concerning. Every woman is different, so any persistent breast change that worsens over time should be evaluated by a healthcare professional. If you have any new symptoms, please see your healthcare provider right away.

If I have no symptoms, should I assume I do not have cancer?

Most breast cancers are diagnosed before symptoms start, such as during your regular screening mammogram. The goal of screening is to find cancer when it is very small, before symptoms start. Although there's no need to worry, it is important to get your regular screening mammogram. The doctors (radiologists) who evaluate these exams can check for breast cancer before you have any noticeable symptoms.

What are the differences between breast cancer symptoms and normal hormonal changes?

Normal changes in the breasts due to the menstrual cycle will generally come and go (fluctuate) over time. The most common of these are in premenopausal women who might feel more breast changes, such as swelling, tenderness, or an increase in "lumpiness," a week or so prior to having their period, which then improves after their period is over.

Generally, symptoms due to breast cancer are focal (localized to one area of the breast) and constant or worsening, meaning the lump continues to increase in size. Although breast cancer rarely presents as pain, this would be a constant pain in one area that does not improve over time.

I shared my symptoms with my doctor, but still feel uneasy. What do I do?

If you have focal symptoms (symptoms in one spot) which persist or progress over time, you should follow up with your doctor again, or seek a second opinion if needed. Keep in mind that it is common for some women to have cyclical, more diffuse (widespread) [breast pain](#) in both breasts which comes and goes throughout their menstrual cycle. This is normal and no additional workup is needed.

Breast Self-Exam

How do I perform a breast self-exam?

[Breast self-exams](#) are a great way to become aware of the way your breasts normally look and feel so that you can easily notice any changes that may occur. All women ages 18 and over should routinely perform a monthly breast self-exam at approximately the same time each month. When it come to breast self-exams, consistency is key. If you ever notice any changes in your breasts during your breast self-exam, report those changes to your healthcare provider right away.

There are three ways to perform a breast self-exam that include options for palpation (touching and feeling) and a visual inspection.

1. In the Shower



With the pads/flats of your 3 middle fingers, check the entire breast and armpit area, pressing down with light, medium, and firm pressure. Remember that breast tissue extends from the collarbone to the breastbone and throughout the armpit area. Check both

breasts each month, feeling for any new lumps, thickenings, hardened knots, or any other breast changes.

2. In Front of a Mirror



With your arms at your sides, visually inspect your breasts, looking for any changes in the contour or shape of the breasts, any dimpling or other skin irregularities on or around the breasts, or any changes in the nipples. Repeat this visual inspection with your arms

raised high overhead.

Next, rest your palms on your hips and press firmly to flex your chest muscles. Look for any dimpling, puckering, or other changes, particularly on one side. Note that the left and right breasts will not exactly match—few women’s breasts are perfectly symmetrical.

3. Lying Down



Place a pillow under your right shoulder and put your right arm behind your head. Using your left hand, move the pads/flats of your 3 middle fingers around your right breast, covering the entire breast and armpit area.

Use light, medium, and firm pressure to feel for any new lumps, thickenings, hardened knots, or any other breast changes. Also squeeze the nipple to check for discharge. Repeat these steps for your left breast.

For more details on breast self-exams, download NBCF’s [Know the Symptoms](#) guide.

How do I perform a breast self-exam after reconstruction and/or having scar tissue after surgery?

It is important to perform regular [breast self-exams](#), particularly in women with implants placed after mastectomy. This self-exam is similar to those without implants or reconstruction. Women with implants should feel around their breasts to identify the edges of the implant, then press firmly inwards around the edges to check for lumps or abnormalities under and around the implant. It is important to remember that breast tissue extends throughout the chest and underarm area, and up to the collarbone, so these areas should also be examined.

For women who may have scars from prior surgeries, it is also important to feel around the scar to see if any new lumps develop. Most of the time, these lumps will be developing scar tissue; however, it is important that any new lumps or changes be evaluated by a healthcare professional.

When is the best time to perform a breast self-exam?

If you are still having your period, the best time to perform a breast self-exam is a few days after your period ends. If you are post-menopausal, the best time to do a breast self-exam is around the same time every month, such as the 1st or 15th day of the month.

Is it okay to always do a breast self-exam in the same position?

Performing your breast self-exam in the same position each month is recommended. This will allow you to become familiar with the normal look and feel of your breasts in that position, enabling you to more easily identify any changes. Changing the position may change the way your breasts look and feel to you. Consistency is key.

How do I know if I'm applying the right amount of pressure during a breast self-exam?

There are three different pressures that should be used when you perform a breast self-exam: light, medium, and firm pressure. Light pressure checks the tissue closest to the surface of the skin, medium pressure checks a little deeper than that, and firm pressure checks the tissue closest to muscle and ribs. When you apply firm pressure, you may feel it in the muscles of your chest and ribs, but it should not cause pain. When applying pressure, use the flat pads of your fingers, not the sharp points or tips.

I'm not sure if the lumps I feel during a breast self-exam are concerning or if that's just how my breasts normally feel. What's the difference?

This is a very common question and rightfully so, as some women have breasts that may feel very “lumpy bumpy,” and it is hard to know if any of these lumps are concerning. The most important part of a breast self-exam is that this is done at regular intervals—around the same time of the month, every month—so you understand what your breasts normally feel like and can identify when there is something new.

Some women may have [breast lumps](#) that are soft, move around, and may increase and decrease in size depending on the timing of their menstrual cycle. These lumps may also sometimes be painful. These lumps likely represent [cysts](#), or fluid-filled areas, which are normal.

Lumps concerning for breast cancer are usually harder (like a frozen pea), do not move around, and continue to grow in size. Skin changes such as dimpling, redness, or bloody nipple discharge are also concerning. If you have these symptoms, please see your healthcare provider right away.

If I have dense breasts, should I still do breast self-exams?

Women who have [dense breast tissue](#) should still perform a monthly breast self-exam. The most important aspect of breast self-exams is that you know what your normal breast tissue feels like, so if you are to discover something new or different, you can see your healthcare provider for further evaluation.

How can I differentiate between breast cysts and breast cancer during breast self-exams?

It is very difficult to tell the difference between a [breast cyst](#) or other benign (non-cancerous) [breast lumps](#) and breast cancer through a breast self-exam. Some women may have multiple cysts in their breasts, which may feel softer (like a water balloon), are mobile, and may get bigger and smaller. Lumps which may be cancerous generally feel harder and firm and continue to grow in size. However, breast cancers may look and feel different depending on the type of breast cancer it is. If you feel any sort of lump in your breast, you should see your healthcare professional immediately to request a mammogram and ultrasound.

Breast Health

How long can I have breast cancer without knowing?

The goal of regular screening mammograms and breast exams is to detect breast cancer when it is so small that there are no symptoms. This means that we can find a breast cancer before you can feel it or even know you have it. Detecting breast cancer early offers more options for treatment and better long-term outcomes.

There are different types of breast cancers and there are some types and characteristics of breast cancers that women can have for years without knowing. These are generally slower-growing breast cancers. However, there are also breast cancers which may grow and present very quickly, which is why it is important for you to see a healthcare provider if you have focal (in one spot) breast symptoms that persist or worsen over time.

What is the difference between ductal and lobular breast cancer?

There are two main types of invasive breast cancers: [invasive ductal carcinoma](#) and [invasive lobular carcinoma](#). Invasive ductal carcinoma (IDC) is the most common type of invasive breast cancer in which the cancer starts growing within the milk ducts and then grows out of the ducts into the surrounding breast tissue. Invasive lobular carcinoma (ILC) is cancer that began forming in the milk lobules (milk glands) and through the surrounding breast tissue. The presentations of these cancers may be slightly different. The way that ILC grows and spreads makes it harder to detect as well as feel. However, it is impossible

to know the definite type of breast cancer just by physical exam and imaging alone; a [biopsy](#) (tissue sample) needs to be done if there is a concerning finding. It is important that you get your regular screening breast exams and let your healthcare professional know if you notice any changes in your breasts.

Is it normal that my breasts don't look or feel the same as each other?

It is common for women to have one breast develop larger than the other. However, with any new symptoms, such as one breast getting larger, harder, swollen, or different from the other, you should see your healthcare provider for further evaluation.

What can I do to be proactive about my breast health and increase the likelihood of early detection?

There are a number of ways to be proactive with your breast health:

- Annual screening [mammograms](#) starting at age 40 for average-risk women
- Monthly [breast self-exams](#)
- Stay up-to-date with well-woman exams to communicate any concerns
- Speak with your doctor to create a screening timeline that is best for you, especially if you are at an increased [risk for breast cancer](#)
- Try to eat a healthy diet
- Exercise regularly

Breast Cancer Recurrence

What are the signs of breast cancer recurrence?

[Breast cancer recurrence](#) is when the same type of breast cancer comes back after treatment when you are in remission. There are three different types of recurrence—local, regional, and distant—and signs and symptoms depend on the type.

Local recurrence is when the breast cancer returns near the prior treatment site and can present as a new lump, thickening of the breast, or skin changes, such as redness or nodules (bumps), on or around the breast. In people who may have had a mastectomy, nodules or redness may appear under or in the skin on the chest or near the surgery scar.

Regional recurrence is when the cancer comes back in the lymph nodes, such as in the neck, armpits, or along the breastbone. In these cases, lumps may be felt in these areas.

Distant recurrence is when the cancer has spread to other areas of the body, such as the bones, liver, or lungs. The signs of distant recurrence are variable, such as pain in one area of the bone which does not improve.

It is important that you follow up with your healthcare provider if you have any new symptoms or concerns which worsen or do not improve over time.

I have faced breast cancer before and am noticing new breast changes now. What do I do?

If you are noticing new breast changes such as a new lump, skin changes (redness, skin dimpling, or puckering) on your chest or under your armpit, or clear or bloody nipple discharge, you should go to your healthcare provider right away. They can help see if you need additional testing such as getting a [diagnostic mammogram](#) or an [ultrasound](#).

Male Breast Cancer

What do men do if they're experiencing breast changes or found a lump?

Men have breast tissue too and can develop [male breast cancer](#). Similar to women, men should see their healthcare provider if they experience breast changes such as nipple discharge, or feel a lump in their breast.

Should men do breast self-exams?

There is currently no evidence to recommend that men who are at average risk for breast cancer do breast self-exams.