

# How to Talk About Breast Health



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# How to Talk About Breast Health



Talking about breast health isn't usually at the top of the list of things to bring up with friends and loved ones. But that's why we need to talk about it. Historically, breast health hasn't been talked about enough in our communities and even in our families. As a national organization, NBCF has the ability to reach many women, but **you** have the most immediate and direct impact in your community and family. That's why we're here to help you navigate these important and potentially life-saving conversations!

All of us at NBCF encourage women to be proactive about their breast health. We often get asked what to say and how to say it when sharing information about breast health with friends and loved ones. There's no rulebook for how to have these important conversations, but there are ways to thoughtfully approach the topic.

We've identified 3 steps to making breast health conversations more productive. We'll walk through each of these steps in detail throughout this eBook, plus share prompts for what to say during these conversations.

Keep in mind, the goal of talking about breast health with loved ones is to become more comfortable and open with prioritizing our health. Accountability is a great goal but be aware that you cannot force someone to prioritize their health or schedule their mammogram. Therefore, the aim of these conversations should simply be to share information in order to empower one another.

*This eBook is intended to be a conversation handbook only and should not be viewed as medical information or a medical guide. Consult a healthcare professional for any pain or symptoms you're experiencing, or if you have a specific medical question.*

## 3 steps to talking about breast health

When approaching a conversation around breast health, these 3 steps can take you from uncertain to accomplished:



### 1. Set the stage

Create a safe space for sharing.



### 2. Know the basics

Many people don't know how important early detection is to women of all ages. Lead with the facts.



### 3. Acknowledge stigmas

Be aware that there might be conscious and unconscious stigmas that come up from this conversation.

## How to create a safe space

To begin the conversation around breast health, it's helpful to start in a safe space. Look for a good opportunity to talk that feels natural, not forced.

Our [prompts](#) for how to start the conversation can help you find an opening for the conversation. If you feel uneasy, simply lead with your heart about why this topic is important to you.

If possible, try to avoid having the conversation in public spaces. It can either be too loud and distracting or could make your loved one feel uncomfortable if others are around. Where do you and your loved one usually talk? Start there. Or, try taking a walk or inviting your friend over for coffee.

## Early detection basics

Breast cancer is a complex topic but understanding the importance of early detection—and what to look for—doesn't have to be. Educate yourself first so you can help others.

Below are some quick early detection stats:

### **Breast cancer is treatable when detected early.**

When breast cancer is detected in the earliest (localized) stages, the 5-year relative survival rate is 99%.<sup>[1]</sup>

**Breast cancer can happen to anyone, at any age, but the risk increases with age.**



**1 in 8 women**

in the United States will develop breast cancer in her lifetime.<sup>[2]</sup>

## **If your breasts ever look or feel different, talk to a doctor right away.**

Common breast cancer symptoms can include the appearance of a new lump or thickening in or near the breast, a change in how the breast or nipple looks or feels, and any nipple discharge—particularly clear or bloody discharge. However, these are not the only signs or symptoms. Any change in the way your breasts look or feel is reason to schedule an appointment with your doctor. <sup>[3]</sup>

## **Breast self-exams, clinical exams, and mammograms are critical for early detection.**

Practicing breast self-awareness helps you know the normal look and feel of your breasts to compare any changes against. If you notice a change, you can report it to your doctor. NBCF recommends that women ages 40 and older, who have an average risk for developing breast cancer, get a mammogram every year. Mammograms can often detect breast cancer before a physical lump is felt. <sup>[4]</sup>

To learn more, view our top early detection resources in the [Appendix](#).

## **Acknowledge stigmas**

Stigmas—shame or embarrassment surrounding certain topics—often keep conversations about women’s health in the dark. For example, a person that has never talked about breast health with someone else might feel like the topic is too personal. That’s an unconscious stigma. They might not know why they don’t think it’s appropriate to talk about breast health, but their behavior and/or reaction show a stigma.

Understanding common stigmas can help empower you for conversations about breast health. Let’s break some of these down:

**It's too private or embarrassing to talk about my body with others.**

**Instead:** I will find someone I trust to talk to—my doctor, my partner, a friend, or loved one. I know they care about me and won't be embarrassed.

**Instead:** Everyone needs support and encouragement to prioritize their health and seek help when needed. Me included.

**Breasts are sexual.**

**Instead:** Breasts are organs that need medical care like the rest of my body.

**Instead:** Breasts are a part of our bodies. Breast cancer is too prevalent to be afraid to talk about.

**No one in my family ever talks about breast health.**

**Instead:** I will be the one to change this pattern because my family's health matters.

**Instead:** We know more about breast cancer than we ever have before. We can change this pattern and emphasize early detection for all.

## **Why people ignore symptoms**

Many people lead busy lives—work, kids, partners, household tasks, and more. Our community often shares that they get too busy—or feel too uncomfortable—to properly prioritize their breast health through screenings or doctor appointments. This can lead to ignoring or downplaying symptoms, or neglecting breast health in general. Whether this applies to you or a loved one, it can be helpful to understand these mindsets so we can shift our priorities.

## Reframing breast health priorities\*

I'm a busy parent.



I prioritize my health so I can be present for my kids.

I'm afraid to get bad news.



Fear of receiving bad news won't make it go away. It's best to be proactive about my health.

A well-woman exam is uncomfortable. A mammogram is painful.



I can withstand a short amount of discomfort. Regular exams will give me the best chance at early detection.<sup>[5]</sup>

I don't want to inconvenience anyone by taking time for an appointment.



My health is a priority, and I am worth it.

I can't afford a mammogram.



There are [financial resources](#) available to help me afford this. I will seek them out.

I don't feel comfortable with my doctor.



I can advocate for myself until I find a doctor I feel comfortable with.

The women in my family don't prioritize breast health.



I am in charge of my health and can set a healthy example for younger generations.

I don't know how to do a breast self-exam or what a breast lump feels like.



There are free resources available that make [breast self-awareness](#) easy. I'll do some research.

It's easy to forget to do breast self-exams.



I can set an alarm on my calendar/phone. I don't want to look back and wish I had done more.

\*These are just a few examples, not an exhaustive list. These examples may not be applicable to every person or every scenario.

## How to start the conversation

Now that you're in the right mindset and understand early detection basics, it's time to start the conversation. This framework might help:

- Lead with a statement of caring.
- Be honest and genuine.
- Share a why-statement.
- Share something personal.
- Focus on empowerment.
- Share reliable information.
- Close with care.

Below are some helpful prompts for each step of the conversation. Some may feel right to you, and others may not. These are only meant to be a guide—there is no pressure to use language that doesn't work for you.

### **Lead with a statement of caring.**

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Try saying:

- I care about you and want to talk to you about something important.
- I want to share something that's been on my heart lately.
- This topic hits close to home, so I wanted to talk about it with you.
- You are important to me.
- I want to talk about something that's important for all women, especially those I love.
- I value you and your presence in my life.

## Be honest and genuine.

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### Try saying:

- This is really important to me, so I want to share something with you.
- I lost a loved one to breast cancer and it's made me prioritize my health in new ways.
- I think it's time we talk openly about our breast health.
- As women, we often don't put ourselves first. We need to change that.

## Share a why-statement.

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**Try saying:** We should prioritize our breast health because...

- 1 in 8 women will be diagnosed with breast cancer.<sup>[2]</sup>
- Early detection saves lives.<sup>[6]</sup>
- Breast cancer is easier to treat if caught early.<sup>[1]</sup>
- Everyone deserves access to quality care.
- I don't want to live in fear of the unknown.
- Breast cancer affects so many of us—daughters, mothers, sisters, and friends.
- Anyone, at any age, can get breast cancer.<sup>[7]</sup>
- I want to make healthy choices for my family.
- I'm worth it.

## Share something personal.

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### Try saying:

- I just had my well-woman exam.
- I recently learned how to do a breast self-exam.
- I need to schedule my mammogram.
- I've been trying to be better at knowing my body.
- One of my friends just had a breast cancer scare.
- We're getting older.
- We/I just turned 40.
- We're young, but we should start focusing on our health now.
- It's Breast Cancer Awareness Month—let's talk about it.
- I read an amazing story about a breast cancer survivor.

## Focus on empowerment.

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### Try saying:

- We are strong, brave, and smart. Prioritizing our health makes sense.
- We need to set a good example for our family, friends, and loved ones.
- I have control over my choices.
- I want to live a long, healthy life and be there for my family.
- Our health is not a burden.
- Thinking of our own health is not selfish.
- Healthy people are important to our community.

## Share reliable information.

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### Try saying:

- There are 3 steps to early detection—breast self-awareness, well-woman exam, and mammogram.<sup>[8]</sup>
- It's important to be familiar with your own body so you can notice changes.
- No one knows your body better than you!
- Practicing breast self-awareness is one useful early detection tool.<sup>[9]</sup> Since health class in middle school, I had forgotten how to do this. The [Know the Symptoms eBook](#) really helped me.
- I feel anxious about my well-woman exam every year but know that it shouldn't be skipped.<sup>[10]</sup> It's a great opportunity to discuss any concerns I have about my breast health with my doctor.
- Most women over 40 should get a mammogram every year.<sup>[11]</sup>
- Breast cancer doesn't always cause symptoms in its early stages; this is why annual mammograms are so important. They can detect breast cancer at the earliest stage possible.<sup>[4]</sup>
- Be sure to ask for a 3D mammogram, if available. If you're worried about insurance coverage or the cost, NBCF has resources to help.



## Close with care.

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### Plan to take action together.

#### Try saying:

- Let's start a friend group text before your mammogram so you feel empowered and supported.
- Let's plan our mammograms during a lunch date. We can support each other.
- Want to take a girls' day? We can get our well-woman exams and then treat ourselves to a fun day off.
- I'm going to add a reminder on my phone for the first date of each month to remind myself to do a breast self-exam.



### Re-emphasize support.

#### Try saying:

- If you notice anything different, don't panic, but call your doctor. I can help you find a doctor or clinic if you don't have one.
- Are you comfortable with your primary care physician or OBGYN? If not, I'd be happy to recommend someone I know and trust.
- If you're comfortable, we can be accountability partners reminding each other to schedule our yearly exams.

## End with appreciation.

### Try saying:

- Thank you for hearing me out on this important topic. I'm so grateful for our relationship.
- I'm thankful we can have these conversations. I appreciate you.
- I'm always here for you.
- I'm available to talk through anything, always.
- Thanks for always having my back.
- Thank you for being open. It means a lot to me.
- I'm proud of you for scheduling your screenings.

Did you find some prompts helpful? Piece them all together in this [worksheet](#).

Congratulations! You now have all the tools you need to start talking about breast health!

We hope you're feeling empowered with what to say about breast health and how to say it in a loving, informative way. We created this resource to boost the confidence of people everywhere to lift each other up and be champions for the cause. Thanks for joining us!

If there's something we missed, or you want to share your experience, [send us a message](#). We love hearing from our community!

## Appendix

### Helpful (free!) early detection resources

#### [3 Steps to Early Detection Guide](#)

Early detection is key. Learn about the 3 steps you can take to be proactive about your breast health and help increase your chances of detecting breast cancer early.

#### [Know the Symptoms Guide](#)

Learn what symptoms to look for in a breast self-exam. Plus, use the checklist to be proactive with your breast health before a professional screening.

#### [Mammogram 101 eBook](#)

Prepare yourself for your yearly mammogram with helpful tips and resources for a smooth screening process.

#### [Healthy Living & Personal Risk Guide](#)

Although women can get breast cancer at any age, the risk of developing breast cancer increases with age. Learn about risk factors and assess your personal risk.

### Take the Mammogram Pledge

[Join the count](#) of women who've scheduled their breast health screenings this year. Plus, get free resources to make screenings easier.

## Worksheet

Write down the prompts from this eBook that resonate most with you to start forming a casual script you can use in the future. This will help you feel more comfortable having an open conversation about breast health.

## Sources

- [1] [American Cancer Society](#)
- [2] [American Cancer Society](#)
- [3] [National Breast Cancer Foundation](#)
- [4] [American Cancer Society](#)
- [5] [American Cancer Society](#)
- [6] [American Cancer Society](#)
- [7] [Cleveland Clinic](#)
- [8] [National Breast Cancer Foundation](#)
- [9] [National Breast Cancer Foundation](#)
- [10] [Health.gov](#)  
[National Breast Cancer Foundation](#)
- [11] [National Breast Cancer Foundation](#)