

## Becoming breast aware

It is important that every woman is breast aware. This means knowing what is normal for you so that if any unusual change occurs, you will recognise it.

### The 5 point breast awareness code

- 1 **Know what is normal for you**
- 2 **Know what changes to look for**
- 3 **Look and feel**
- 4 **Discuss any changes with your GP without delay**
- 5 **Attend for routine breast screening once you are aged 50 and over**

## What to do if you find something

If you do notice any change in your breasts see your GP as soon as possible. Remember that most breast changes are not cancer and are harmless. After examining your breasts, your GP may be able to reassure you that there is nothing to worry about. If the change could be connected with your hormones, your doctor may ask you to come back at a different stage in your menstrual cycle. You may be referred to a specialist breast unit for a more detailed examination. If you are concerned about a breast change, ask your doctor to explain the change. Make sure you are happy with the explanation. If not, get a second opinion.

## Know your risk

Breast cancer is very complex and we don't know what causes it or how to prevent it. However, there seem to be certain factors which can increase a woman's risk of getting the disease.

## The most important risk factors

- Being female
- Getting older
- Having a family history of breast cancer or ovarian cancer
- Having previously been diagnosed with breast cancer

## Other risk factors

- Starting periods early or having a late menopause
- Having no children or having them late in life
- A history of benign breast lumps
- Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT)
- Too much alcohol
- The pill
- Past treatment for Hodgkin's Lymphoma
- Being overweight and not being physically active
- Smoking

*Breastfeeding is a protective factor.*

## Screening

Breast screening involves taking a mammogram (an X-ray) of the breast, which can help to find small changes in the breast before there are other signs of cancer. This is very important, as the earlier a problem is discovered and treated the better the outcome. It is also vital to remain breast aware between mammograms.

### BreastCheck

The National Breast Screening Programme offers free breast cancer screening every two years to women aged 50-64.

*To find out if you are registered for screening, please call BreastCheck at 1800 45 45 55.*

## ABC – Action Breast Cancer

Action Breast Cancer, part of the Irish Cancer Society, is the leading provider of breast cancer information and support in Ireland. Each year we reach over 25,000 women who are concerned about breast cancer or breast health. Our services are free and include:

- **National Breast Cancer Helpline**  
1800 30 90 40 – staffed by specialist cancer nurses
- **Patient care programmes** – providing emotional support and practical assistance for those living with breast cancer
- **Health promotion** – providing community and workplace programmes on breast awareness and leading a healthy lifestyle
- **Advocacy** – providing a voice for those affected by breast cancer in Ireland
- **Professional support** – complementing the services offered by those caring for breast cancer patients
- **Research** – funding vital Irish research that will have a significant impact on the diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer.

*ABC is funded entirely by donations from the public. If you would like to support our work by making a donation please contact:*

Action Breast Cancer  
43/45 Northumberland Road  
Dublin 4  
Tel: (01) 231 0500  
Fax: (01) 231 0555  
Email: [abc@irishcancer.ie](mailto:abc@irishcancer.ie)  
Website: [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie)

For more information visit  
[www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie)

# Know your breasts



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breast  
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a programme of  
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## Your breasts

**It is important for all women to remain breast aware throughout their lives.**

Your breasts will go through many normal changes during your lifetime. These are due to changes in hormones that occur during your menstrual cycle, pregnancy, breastfeeding and the menopause. This leaflet explains the different types of breast changes that can occur. Remember most are harmless but you should always discuss any concerns with your GP.

## Know what is normal for you

### The menstrual cycle

Each month your breasts often change. They can become bigger, tender and lumpy usually before a period starts and return to normal once the period is over.

### Pregnancy and breastfeeding

Your breasts can change during pregnancy. While breastfeeding, your breasts may be very enlarged, firm and tender; this is normal at this time. You should, however, continue to be breast aware and discuss any unusual changes with your GP.

### The menopause

After the menopause your breasts will feel softer and they may get bigger or smaller. If there is a change in only one breast, you should discuss this with your doctor. Continue to be breast aware during and after the menopause.

## Breast pain

Breast pain, also called mastalgia, is a very common problem. About one third of women will experience it at some stage. There are two types of breast pain: cyclical and non-cyclical.

### Cyclical pain

This is related to your menstrual cycle (periods) and changing hormone levels. Your doctor may ask you to keep a chart to find out if there is a pattern to your pain, which clearly links it to your menstrual cycle. Cyclical pain is usually more intense during your teenage years and again in your forties. It has no relation to cancer.

### Non-cyclical pain

This usually arises from the breast itself or from the muscles and ribs under the breast. This type of pain is often described as a *burning* or *drawing-in* sensation. It may be caused by wearing the wrong size bra. All breast changes should be discussed with your GP.

## Breast lumps

Breast lumps can appear at any time during your life. They can be large or small, soft or rubbery, fluid-filled or solid. Your doctor should check all lumps. Many women experience the following types of lumps during their life:

**Generalised breast lumpiness** (also called fibrocystic changes or fibrocystic disease)

Your breasts may feel tender, painful or swollen. Lumpy breasts become more obvious as you approach middle age. Such lumpiness is often described as glandular or nodular and usually occurs in both breasts.

### Fibroadenoma

This is the most common solid lump found in

women at any age. It is caused by the over development of fibrous tissue in the breast. There is no need to remove a fibroadenoma unless it becomes painful or very large. If you develop one after the age of 30 your doctor may advise you to have it removed. Removing a fibroadenoma is a simple procedure and it can be done as an outpatient.

### Cysts

These are swollen, fluid-filled sacs, which often become enlarged, tender and painful just before your period. They can disappear on their own, but if they don't, they should be checked by a doctor.

### Fat necrosis

This is a painless firm lump formed by damaged tissue. It usually occurs in response to an injury to the breast.

## Nipple changes

### Inversion

This is where the nipple turns in on itself. Some women are born with inverted nipples and this is quite normal. However, if a nipple changes direction or becomes turned in, it may mean there is an underlying problem. A doctor should always check this change.

### Discharge

*Milky discharge:* This can occur after breastfeeding has ceased or if you are taking certain medications.

*Yellow or green discharge:* This can indicate an infection caused by blocked ducts and may require a course of antibiotics.

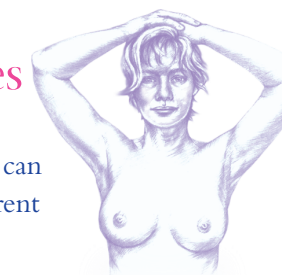
*Blood-stained discharge:* This may be caused by a benign duct papilloma (a growth similar to a wart) or sometimes there may be a more serious problem. Blood-stained discharge should be discussed with your doctor immediately.

## What changes should I be aware of?

- A change in size or shape – one breast may become larger than the other
- Changes in the nipple – in direction or shape, pulled in or flattened, or unusual discharge
- Changes on or around the nipple – rash, flaky or crusted skin
- Changes in the skin – dimpling, puckering or redness
- Swelling in your armpit or around your collarbone
- A lump, any size, or thickening in your breast
- Constant pain in one part of your breast or armpit

## Look for changes

One way of looking is by using a mirror so that you can see your breasts from different angles.



## Feel for changes

An easy way of feeling your breast is with a soapy hand in the bath or shower. Some women prefer to feel for changes while lying down.



For further information, please call the National Breast Cancer Helpline Freephone 1800 30 90 40