

# KNOW YOUR BREASTS

A guide to  
breast awareness  
and screening



**BREAST  
CANCER  
NOW** The research &  
support charity



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## About this booklet

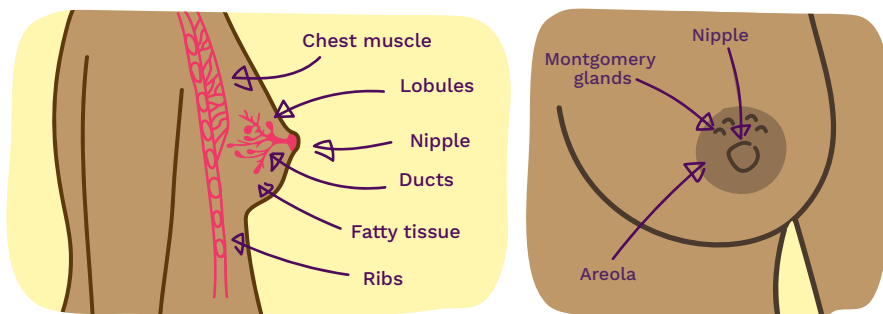
Being breast aware means knowing what's normal for you so you can spot any unusual changes as soon as possible.

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 also includes information about breast screening and what this involves.

Although the booklet is for women, men should also be aware of any changes in their chest area. This is because a very small number of men get breast cancer each year. There is more information about men and breast cancer on our website [breastcancer.org](http://breastcancer.org)

## About your breasts

Breasts are made up of milk-producing glands (lobules) and tubes that carry milk to the nipple (ducts). These are surrounded by tissue that gives the breasts their size and shape.



The nipple is surrounded by a darker area of skin called the areola. On the areola there are some small, raised bumps which produce fluid to moisturise the nipple. These are called Montgomery glands.

# Breast changes throughout your life

Your breasts change throughout your life. This is because levels of the hormones oestrogen and progesterone in your body change at different times during your life.

Sometimes breast changes are caused by a benign (not cancer) breast condition.

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

## When breasts start to develop

Breasts usually 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. This time in a girl's life is called puberty.

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.

## 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.

## Breast pain

Breast pain is very common in women of all ages.

It can have lots of different causes but, on its own, breast pain is rarely a sign of breast cancer.

Having breast pain does not increase your risk of breast cancer. However, it's still important to be breast aware and see your GP if the pain increases or changes.

Having painful, sore or tender breasts can cause a lot of anxiety. It can be useful to keep a pain chart to see if there is any pattern to your pain.

For more information about the different types of breast pain, as well as an example of a pain chart, see our **Breast pain** booklet.

## Soreness under the breasts

Soreness or irritation under one or both breasts is common, especially if you have larger breasts. This is known as intertrigo.

Intertrigo can happen anywhere on the body where skin rubs against skin, causing friction and trapping moisture. A warm, moist environment also encourages yeast, fungal or bacterial infections.

If your intertrigo is severe, you may need treatment.

To reduce your risk of getting intertrigo, or to stop an infection getting worse, you should:

- Wash under your breasts every morning and night with a soap substitute, such as emulsifying ointment (you can ask your pharmacist about this)
- Gently dry the skin under your breasts thoroughly after washing
- Wear a well-fitting, supportive bra made from a natural material such as cotton
- Try to maintain a weight that's normal for you

You can find more information on our website at [breastcancer.org/intertrigo](https://breastcancer.org/intertrigo)

## During pregnancy

Breast changes can be an early sign of pregnancy.

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 breasts and areolas begin to get bigger. The nipples and areolas become darker and remain darker during pregnancy.

## When breastfeeding

Large amounts of milk are produced to breastfeed a newborn baby. 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, breasts gradually go back to how they were before pregnancy. However, they may be a different size and less firm than before.

## Breast lumps

Breast lumps can have a number of different causes.

Common causes of breast lumps include:

- Breast cyst – a fluid-filled sac that can develop as the breasts change with age, more common in women who haven't been through the menopause (pre-menopausal women)
- Fibroadenoma – a lump that often develops during puberty but can occur at any age

It's important to get any breast lumps checked by your doctor, as a lump can be a sign of cancer.



## During and after the menopause

As oestrogen levels fall during and after the menopause, breasts may change size, lose their firmness, feel softer and may droop.

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

### Wearing a well-fitting bra

Wearing a well-fitting bra can help if you feel any discomfort or back pain. Department stores and specialist bra shops usually have trained fitters who can help you find a bra that fits you properly.

For more information see our leaflet **Your guide to a well-fitting bra**.

## Being breast aware

Breast cancer is the most common cancer in women in the UK. So whatever your age, it's important to be breast aware.

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

If you notice a change, it's important to see your GP.

### How do I check my breasts?

Checking your breasts is as easy as TLC:

- **Touch** your breasts: can you feel anything new or unusual?
- **Look** for changes: does anything look different to you?
- **Check** any new or unusual changes with a GP

Get used to looking at and feeling your breasts regularly.

A good time to do this might be when you're in the bath or shower, using body lotion or getting dressed.

There's no special way to check your breasts and you do not need any training. Everyone will have their own way of touching and looking for changes.

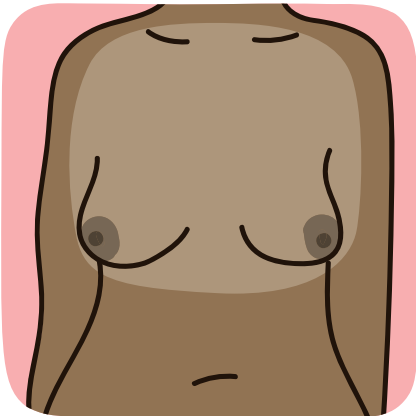
## Changes to look and feel for

Everyone's breasts look and feel different.

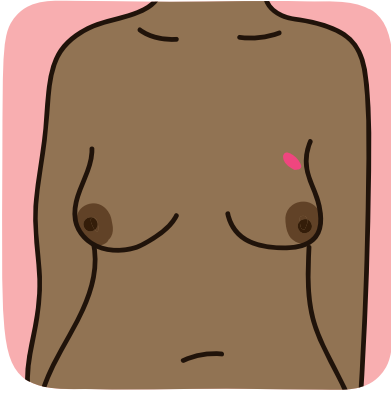
Some women have lumpy breasts, one breast larger than the other or breasts that are different shapes. Some have one or both nipples pulled in (inverted), which can be there from birth or happen when the breasts are developing.

When you check your breasts, be aware of any changes that are different for you.

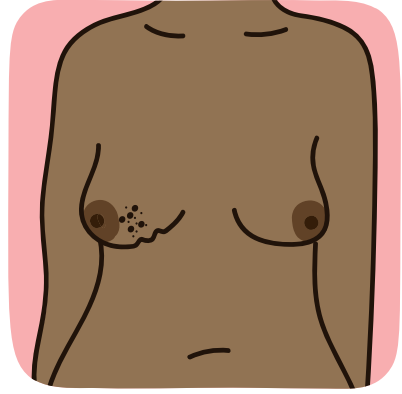
Signs and symptoms may appear differently on various skin tones.



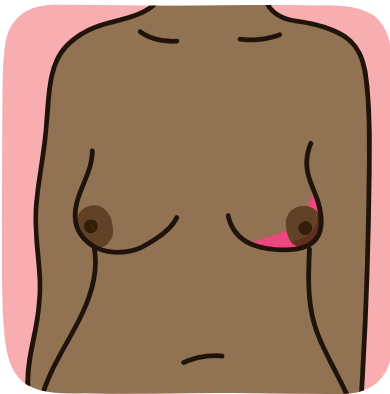
Check your whole breast area, including up to your collarbone (upper chest) and armpits for **changes**.



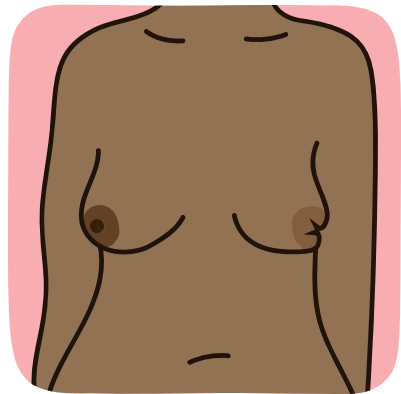
A **lump or swelling** in the breast, upper chest or armpit



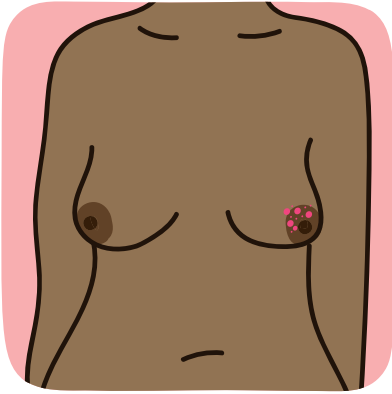
A **change to the skin**, such as puckering or dimpling



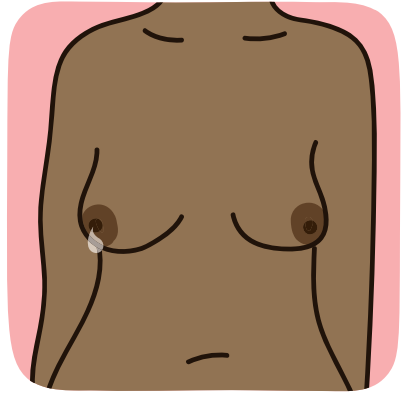
A change to the **colour** of the breast – the breast may look darker, red or inflamed



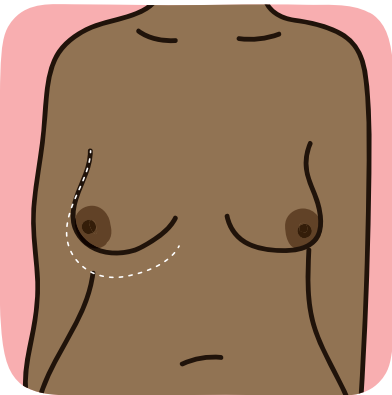
A **nipple change**, for example it has become pulled in (inverted)



**Rash or crusting** around the nipple



**Unusual liquid** (discharge) from either nipple



**Changes in size or shape** of the breast

On its own pain in your breasts is not usually a sign of cancer. But look out for pain in your breast or armpit that's there all or almost all the time.

## What to do if you find a change

You know better than anyone how your breasts look and feel normally, so see your GP as soon as you can if you notice a change.

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's causing the change.

## Seeing your GP

Your appointment may be over the phone or in person. If your appointment is in person, your GP will examine your breasts.

After speaking to you on the phone, or examining your breasts, your GP may:

- Decide there's no need for further investigation
- Ask to see you again after a short time
- Refer you to a breast clinic

Being referred to a breast clinic doesn't mean you have breast cancer, just that further assessment is needed to find out what is going on.

If your GP is male and you don't feel comfortable going to see him, ask if there's a female doctor or practice nurse 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, but check first if you are able to do this.

For more information about what happens at a breast clinic and the tests you may have, see our booklet **Your breast clinic appointment**.

# Breast screening

## What is breast screening?

Breast screening uses a breast x-ray, called a mammogram, to look for cancer that may be too small to see or feel.

The sooner breast cancer is found, the more successful treatment is likely to be.

Breast screening can pick up breast cancer before there are any signs or symptoms.

Breast cancer is the most common cancer in women in the UK, and the number of people diagnosed each year is rising. However, the number of deaths from breast cancer is falling. This is due to reasons such as earlier diagnosis, improved and newer treatments, and patients taking part in clinical trials. It may also be due to breast screening.

## When will I be invited for screening?

### Breast screening age

In the UK, women aged 50 or over are invited for a mammogram every 3 years until their 71st birthday. This is part of a national breast screening programme.

This may not happen the year you turn 50, but it will happen by the time you're 53.

You have to be registered with a GP to be automatically invited for screening.

### **If you're 71 or over**

If you're 71 or over, you will not be automatically sent an invitation for screening.

However, in some parts of the UK you can continue to have breast screening every 3 years if you contact your local breast screening unit and ask for it.

Your GP surgery can put you in touch with your local breast screening clinic or you can look them up online.

### **Why are women under 50 not invited for screening?**

Women under 50 are not automatically invited for breast screening because the number of women who get breast cancer is much lower in this age group.

Over 80% of breast cancers occur in women over the age of 50 and the risk continues to increase with age.

Younger women also have denser breast tissue, which can make the x-ray image less clear and changes harder to identify.

### **Age extension trial**

In England, some breast screening clinics were taking part in a trial where some women under 50 and over 70 were invited for screening. This was to see if it would be beneficial to extend the age range for all women in the future.

As part of the age extension trial, some women aged 47 to 49 and 71 to 73 were invited for a mammogram. The results of the trial are being looked at to see if screening would be appropriate for this age group.



## If you're transgender or non-binary

Some transgender or non-binary people can access breast screening. This includes:

- Transgender men and non-binary people assigned female at birth who have not had an operation to remove their breast tissue
- Transgender women and non-binary people assigned male at birth who have taken feminising hormones

Whether you are invited for breast screening will depend on whether you are registered with your GP as female or male.

Talk to your GP or gender identity clinic for more information, or call your local breast screening service. You can find this on the NHS website (NHS.UK)

## Benefits of breast screening

### Screening finds breast cancer early

Breast screening can find a breast cancer early, before it can be seen or felt.

The sooner breast cancer is found, the more likely it is to respond well to treatment, and the less likely you are to need more extensive surgery.

### Screening prevents deaths

Screening prevents an estimated 1,300 deaths from breast cancer each year in the UK.

## Disadvantages of breast screening

### It can be uncomfortable

Some people find having a mammogram uncomfortable. However, this isn't always the case and a mammogram only takes a few seconds.

### Some people will be offered unnecessary treatment

Some cancers found through breast screening will not develop any further or will grow so slowly they will never cause any harm during a person's life.

At the moment, doctors cannot tell which cancers can be left alone, so treatment is offered for all breast cancers. This means some people may have unnecessary treatment (known as overtreatment).

### A small number of cancers are missed

Mammograms are the most reliable way of detecting breast cancer sooner. However, they're not 100% reliable and a small number of breast cancers are missed.

### Being recalled can cause worry and distress

Around 4 out of every 100 women screened are recalled for further assessment. This is usually because an area has shown up on the mammogram and more information is needed before a result can be given.

The majority of people recalled do not have breast cancer. However, being recalled or having more tests can cause a lot of worry and distress.

### You're exposed to a small amount of radiation

Having a mammogram every 3 years for 20 years means being exposed to a small amount of radiation. This can very slightly increase the risk of developing breast cancer in the future.

The amount of radiation you are exposed to during a mammogram is very low, and you would receive a similar amount from a return flight between London and Australia.

## What happens during breast screening?

### Your appointment will be at a breast screening unit

This might be a breast screening clinic or a mobile screening unit.

You'll be asked to complete a questionnaire. It will ask about any ongoing medical conditions, if you're having hormone replacement therapy (HRT), and if you've had any breast problems.

### Your mammogram will be carried out by a woman

A female mammography practitioner (an expert in taking breast x-rays) will explain what will happen and answer any questions you have.

Let her know if you're pregnant or think you may be pregnant.

You'll be asked to remove your clothing from the waist up.

You'll stand in front of the mammogram machine.

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 2 pictures (x-rays) 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'll need to stay in position while the pictures are taken.

Taking the pictures only takes a few seconds.

### Getting your results

The results of your screening mammogram are sent by post to you and your GP.

Most people will receive a letter telling them that their mammogram showed no signs of cancer. They'll be invited for screening again in 3 years.

20 Call our helpline on **0808 800 6000**

Some people will get a letter asking them to come back for further assessment. This is because more tests are needed to assess a change seen on the mammogram. Being recalled doesn't necessarily mean that you have breast cancer. For more information about these tests, see our booklet **Your breast clinic appointment**.

Occasionally some people receive a letter asking them to go back for another mammogram because a technical issue meant the image was unclear.

## **Staying breast aware between mammograms**

Having mammograms cannot prevent breast cancer, and it's possible for breast cancer to develop in the 3 years between each mammogram. It's important to continue to be breast aware and report any changes to your GP, even if you have had a mammogram recently.

If you have any questions about breast screening, call our helpline on **0808 800 6000**.



We're Breast Cancer Now, the research and support charity. However you're experiencing breast cancer, we're here.

### **Life-changing support**

Whoever you are, and whatever your experience of breast cancer, our free services are here. Whether you're worried about breast cancer, dealing with a diagnosis, working out life with or beyond treatment – or someone you love is.

### **World-class research**

We support over 290 of the brightest minds in breast cancer research. They're discovering how to prevent breast cancer, live well with the disease, and save lives. Every day, they get closer to the next breakthrough.

### **Change-making campaigns**

We fight for the best possible treatment, services and care for everyone affected by breast cancer, alongside thousands of dedicated campaigners.

#### **Could you help?**

We don't get any government or NHS funding for our support services or health information. So, we rely on donations and gifts in wills to make our vital work happen. If you'd like to support us, go to [breastcancer.org/give](https://breastcancer.org/give)

# ABOUT THIS BOOKLET

**Know your breasts** was written by Breast Cancer Now'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:  
Email [health-info@breastcancer.org](mailto:health-info@breastcancer.org)



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## Medical disclaimer

We make every effort to ensure that our health information is accurate and up to date, but it doesn't replace the information and support from professionals in your healthcare team. So far as is permitted by law, Breast Cancer Now doesn't accept liability in relation to the use of any information contained in this publication, or third-party information included or referred to in it.

# BREAST CANCER

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## We're here

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### Information you can trust, support you can count on

Whatever breast cancer brings, we're here for you.

Whether you're looking for information about breast cancer or want to speak to someone who understands, you can rely on us.

Call **0808 800 6000** to talk things through with our helpline nurses.

Visit **[breastcancer.org](https://breastcancer.org)** for reliable breast cancer information.

### Breast Cancer Now

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Patient Information Forum

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