

## Looking after your breasts

You tend to take your breasts for granted most of the time – unless like some women you're blessed with a larger than average pair, or a set that tend to hurt like hell when you're hormonal. However – it's important to look after your breasts. Breast cancer is one of the most common cancers in women and so the health of your two favourite assets should never be neglected.

According to Cancer Research UK, there are more than 44,600 new cases of breast cancer every single year in the UK<sup>1</sup>. It accounts for around one-in-three of all cancer cases in women, and as a woman you have a one-in-nine chance of being affected by breast cancer in your lifetime.

Breast cancer can develop in the milk-producing glands in your breast, or sometimes in the passages or ducts that deliver milk to the nipples. Some breast cancers also spread into surrounding tissue and to other parts of the body.

It's not all bad news though; early detection and better treatments mean that breast cancer death rates in the UK have fallen by a fifth in the last decade.

### What's the risk?

Like all cancers, your risk of developing breast cancer depends on many different factors.

Some of the most common risk factors are:

- **Age.** Breast cancer is rare in women under 30, and the older you are the more likely you are to develop it.
- **Menstruation and menopause.** If you started your periods at a young age or reached the menopause later you have an increased risk of breast cancer.
- **The Pill.** The contraceptive pill is said to cause a slightly increased risk, although the elevated risk gradually returns to normal when you stop taking it.
- **Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT).** Women taking HRT are more likely to develop breast cancer, especially those taking the combined oestrogen/progestogen version. Your risk increases the longer you take HRT, but will reduce back to normal within five years of stopping HRT.

- **Bodyweight.** Being overweight after the menopause increases the risk of breast cancer due to the way that excess body fat affects your oestrogen levels.
- **Alcohol.** If you drink alcohol, it increases the risk of breast cancer. The more you drink on a daily basis, the higher your risk becomes.
- **Family history.** Your risk is increased if one or more of your close relatives (for example, your mother or sister) have been diagnosed with breast cancer, but most women with just one or two affected relatives won't get breast cancer. (Most women with breast cancer don't actually have a family history of it.)

Some factors actually reduce your risk of getting breast cancer, and these are:

- **Having children.** For some reason, the more children you have, and the younger you are when you have them, the lower your risk of breast cancer is.
- **Breastfeeding.** If you breastfeed your children, this also reduces the chances of you developing the disease. The longer you breastfeed for the lower the risk.

### **Prevention is better than cure**

Just as we should all have regular smear tests for cervical cancer, visit the dentist for checkups and generally make sure that we are as healthy as possible – it's very important that we carry out a breast examination regularly too. It takes only 10 or 15 minutes, its best carried out once a month (ideally at the same point in your cycle, to take account of any hormonal changes), and once you learn how to do it, and get into the habit, it will become second nature. It's a crucial self-help procedure that might just save your life.

### **The Examination**

Examining your breasts should be a two-stage process, firstly, a visual check, and then the manual examination. Your breasts may feel different depending on the time of the month and your age and life stage (menopause, pregnancy etc). Get to know your own breasts, how they look and feel, and then you will be able to quickly identify anything unusual.

The main signs that you're looking for are;

- Changes in the size, shape or feel of your breasts.

- One breast appearing lower than the other – if this is not usual for you
- A change in the size of one breast – again if this isn't a normal pre-menstrual symptom.
- Changes in skin texture anywhere on the breast
- Puckering or pulling in the skin on the breast
- Thickening or unusual lumps anywhere on the breast

#### Changes in your nipples

- Changes to the shape of the nipples
- A rash around the nipple
- Discharge from a nipple

### **The Visual Check**

Stand in front of the mirror and with your hands clasped together behind your head, straighten and lower your arms a few times to see if the nipples on both of your breasts move in the same way.

Look at your breasts in profile – can you see anything unusual? Check for rashes, puckering and any signs mentioned above. Then do the same straight on, bending forward to check for anything unusual.

### **The Manual Check**

- Using the flat of your hand and with your fingers straight and together, make circular movements with your hand to check the tissue in and around your breasts for any unusual changes, bumps or irregularities.
- Starting with the right breast, raise your right arm above your head, and use your left hand to feel the top and outer part of your breast, then under your arm.
- Move your left hand in a complete circle round the outside of your breast, then move a couple of centimetres in towards the nipple and repeat. Continue until you reach the nipple.
- Squeeze your nipple gently to check for any discharge.

Repeat the same moves on your left breast using your right hand.

If you find anything unusual make an appointment straight away to see your doctor. The vast majority of the time there will be nothing sinister; you may have a harmless cyst for example. Breast cancer is a very treatable cancer, so if you do find something, don't panic – you spotted it early.

## Summary:

- Breast cancer is the most common cancer in women
- It's rare in under thirties
- There are several factors that increase your risk of developing breast cancer
- There are also factors that make you less likely to get breast cancer
- Getting to know how your breasts look and feel and carrying out regular self examination are the best way to identify any changes.

## References:

1. <http://info.cancerresearchuk.org/cancerandresearch/cancers/breast/>

-----  
A wide range of women's health resources are available at [www.healthywomen.org.uk](http://www.healthywomen.org.uk)

Disclaimer: This article is for general information only and is not intended to replace a consultation with a healthcare professional, nor is it intended to provide specific medical advice and should not be used for the diagnosis or treatment of medical conditions.

© Copyright Bayer plc 2009 Last reviewed: March 16th 2009 Doc ID: Oi128 Version: 1  
-----