

Breast lumps



My breasts are lumpy all the time, will I get cancer?

Having lumpy breasts can be perfectly normal for some women. The most common lump is called diffuse nodularity or benign breast change in which the breasts feel generally knobbly, but without an obvious lump. This is within the range of normal breast development, and can occur at any time, though it occurs less often following the menopause. Often it varies with your menstrual cycle, being worse before a period, and it may be painful.

If your breasts are the same both sides with no lump bigger than any other, your GP will be able to reassure you that you have benign breast change. You will be advised to check your own breasts after your period each month, and if you are over 47, to take part in the NHS screening mammography. Having this type of benign nodularity does not put you at any greater risk of cancer than someone without it.

What will the doctor do if I find a lump?

If you think you have a lump your doctor will examine you to determine whether there is a lump and what it feels like. Many women have lumps or lumpiness. Nine out of ten women referred to a breast clinic do not have cancer, but have one of a range of other benign conditions, the commonest of which are fibroadenoma and cyst.

If there is a single lump, different in texture from the rest of your breast, your GP may refer you to hospital for a diagnosis. There you will probably have a mammogram or ultrasound investigation and be examined by a specialist who may insert a fine needle and draw off fluid or cells from the lump. If it is a cyst, the lump generally disappears completely, and you will be discharged from the unit.

If the lump remains solid, tissue that has been drawn off will be sent to the laboratory for examination. If the report is benign and there are no suspicious features on the ultrasound, particularly if you are under 30, most specialists would advise no further action other than your own continued observation.

Under certain circumstances, the lump may be removed and examined. Generally, this is a small operation, and there is very little scarring or alteration in the breast afterwards.

Provided the lump is benign and you do not have a first-degree relative (your mother, sister or daughter) with breast cancer, you can go back to your own regular self-examination and the NHS mammography if you are 47 or over. A lump may be left in, even in women over 30, provided all the tests show it is benign.

How can I know if the lump is cancer or not?

Breast cancer is uncommon under the age of 35, and very rare under 25. From around 40, it does get more common. Women are encouraged to have regular mammograms through the NHS Breast Screening Programme between the ages of 47 and 73.

What is fibroadenoma?

A lump is most likely to be a fibroadenoma if you are under 30. It is caused by an over-development of fibrous tissue and varies in size. Some women may have several such lumps. Fibroadenoma are harmless and do not develop into cancer. Many doctors do not routinely remove them unless the woman so wishes. They generally stay the same size, but if they get larger they are often removed to allay anxiety.

What is a cyst?

Cysts tend to appear in women in their 40s and 50s. They are fluid filled sacs in the breast tissue and are characterised by sudden appearance, often associated with pain. There may be several in one or both breasts.

The cysts may resolve themselves or your GP or specialist may draw off fluid using a needle. This results in instant relief and confirms the diagnosis. This is no more painful than having a blood test, and once the fluid has gone the cyst usually disappears. The doctor may ask for further investigations such as mammogram or ultrasound, or may recommend that if there are remaining lumps they should be removed. Cysts have a habit of coming back, but once the diagnosis has been established, they can be treated by once again drawing off the fluid.

What is breast awareness?

It makes sense to be aware of your breasts and to know what is normal for you.

Each breast contains 15-20 clusters of glands designed to produce milk. Channels from each gland join together (a bit like a bunch of grapes) and each cluster has a main duct that opens at the nipple. The glands are embedded in fatty tissue that gives the breast their individual shape; normally women can feel the glands within their breasts.

By regularly checking your own breasts, you become aware of what is normal for you throughout the month; familiar lumps and bumps that do not change over the months are not a cause for concern. If you are thin you will be able to feel your ribs. If in doubt about any particular area of your breast, check your other breast, and if the lumpiness is the same in both breasts, all you need to do is check them again the following month. If you are still having periods, do this a few days after your period; if not, make it the first week of each month.

To check your breasts, stand in front of a mirror with your clothes removed, and raise your arms above your head. Look for any new difference in size or shape between the breasts, any puckering of the skin or alteration of the nipple.

Lie down (some women find it easiest to do this in the bath using a soapy hand), with your fingers flat, feel over the whole surface of both your breasts, feeling for anything which is different from last time. Also check in the armpit.

Breast tissue does tend to get smaller after the menopause, but it is usually very gradual. Much of your breast is made up of fatty tissue, and will reflect your general body contours.

If you find new lumps in your breast which concern you, please see your GP.

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