

Breast health

Breasts come in all shapes and sizes. Many women get breast lumps, cysts, mastitis and painful breasts. Knowing what's normal, how to conduct a breast check and when to see your doctor about changes to your breasts is important.

About breasts

Each breast comprises 15-20 lobes containing milk sacs. Fat and fibrous tissue surrounds the lobes, giving breasts their individual size and shape. The size of breasts does not determine how much milk they will produce. It's normal for one breast to be slightly larger than the other. Breasts contain blood vessels, lymph glands and nerves, making breast tissue sensitive to touch.



Normal breast changes during life

Throughout life, breast tissue is subject to the hormonal changes associated with the menstrual cycle, pregnancy, breastfeeding, and menopause. Breast tissue can become more tender and lumpy just prior to, and less tender and lumpy after, a menstrual period. In the years close to menopause changes in hormone levels can increase breast pain and the fibrous tissue is replaced by fatty tissue. It is quite common for breasts to be lumpy or have benign (non-cancerous) nodules.

Common breast conditions

Painful breasts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Also called mastalgia and often linked to the menstrual cycle • Breasts become tender or painful just before your period due to hormonal activity and fluid retention
Fibrous lump	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Also called fibroadenomas: fibrous lumps consist of glands and non-cancerous (benign) fibrous tissue • They occur frequently in women 15-30 years of age and occasionally in older women
Breast cysts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A fluid filled sac in the breast tissue, often small <10cm • Can be painful and change in size with the menstrual period • Common in women aged 35-50 years
Benign fibrocystic disease	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some women have a combination of non-cancerous cysts and thickened breast tissue • This lumpiness may vary with the menstrual cycle
Nipple discharge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watery, blood stained, or discharge containing pus may be caused by an abscess or harmless papilloma, but do check with your doctor
Inflammation (mastitis)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most common when breastfeeding; causes redness, heat, lumpiness and pain • Can occur at other times due to blockage of the breast duct and you need to check this with your doctor, especially if you are not breastfeeding

What can you do to help with breast health?

Breast checks

Being familiar with the way your breasts look and feel makes it easier to notice if any changes occur. From your 20s onwards do the following checks once a month.

1. Stand in front of a mirror, hands on hips and shoulders straight. Look at the shape, colour and size of your breasts. While looking in the mirror raise your arms in the air and look again at the shape, colour and size of your breasts. This helps to see if there are any changes to shape or colour, such as swelling, redness or puckering.
2. Feel your breasts while lying down with your arm bent at the elbow and resting above your head. Stretch your hands so palms and fingers are flat – this allows you to feel without poking your breasts.
3. Use the opposite hand to feel a breast (right hand and left breast). Ensure you feel the entire breast area from collarbone to tummy and include your armpits. This is another way to look for lumps, areas that are painful, dimpled, flattened or different from before.
4. Some women like to check their breasts when they are under the shower and their breasts are wet and slippery, making it easier to notice any changes.

Relieve breast tenderness or pain

If you experience painful tender breasts you may like to try:

- a warm shower, bath or hot water bottle
- a comfortable, supportive bra such as a sports bra
- going without a bra may be more comfortable
- reducing salt, fat and caffeine intake to help with fluid retention
- talking with an accredited naturopath to discuss possible use of vitamin B6 (pyridoxine), vitamin B1 (thiamine) and/or evening primrose oil
- relaxation exercises, meditation and mindfulness to calm the mind and body

When to see your doctor

- New lumps
- New lumpiness
- Changes in breast shape or colour
- Changes in the nipple
- Discharge from your nipple
- Puckering of breast skin

For more information, go to jeanhailes.org/health-a-z/breast-health

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This fact sheet is designed to be informative and educational. It is not intended to provide specific medical advice or replace advice from your medical practitioner.

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