

# Breast health

Breasts come in all shapes and sizes. Many women get painful breasts, breast lumps, cysts, mastitis and other breast problems. 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 is composed of 15-20 lobes containing milk sacs. Fat and fibrous tissue surround 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 also 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

<b>PAINFUL BREASTS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Also called mastalgia and often linked to the menstrual cycle</li><li>• Breasts become tender or painful just before your period due to hormonal activity and fluid retention</li></ul>
<b>FIBROUS LUMPS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Also called fibroadenomas, these consist of glands and non-cancerous (benign) fibrous tissue</li><li>• They occur frequently in women 15-30 years of age and occasionally in older women</li></ul>
<b>BREAST CYSTS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Lumps made of fluid-filled sacs in the breast tissue, often small (&lt;10mm) but can be as big as a golf ball</li><li>• Can be painful and change in size with the menstrual period</li><li>• Common in women aged 35-50 years</li></ul>
<b>BENIGN FIBROCYSTIC DISEASE</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Lumpiness comprised of a combination of benign cysts and thickened breast tissue</li><li>• This lumpiness can be painful and may vary with the menstrual cycle</li></ul>

<p><b>NIPPLE DISCHARGE</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Watery or blood-stained discharge or discharge containing pus may be caused by an abscess or harmless papilloma</li> <li>• Always have this checked by your doctor</li> </ul>
<p><b>INFLAMMATION (MASTITIS)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most common when breastfeeding, it causes redness, heat, lumpiness and pain</li> <li>• Can occur at other times due to blockage of the breast duct</li> <li>• Get this checked by your doctor, especially if you are not breastfeeding</li> </ul>

## 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 and nipples. 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, such as swelling, lumpiness, redness, dimpling or puckering of the breast skin, or inverting of the nipples.
2. Feel your breasts while lying down with one arm bent at the elbow and resting above your head. Stretch your other hand so your palm and fingers are flat – this allows you to feel without poking your breasts.
3. Ensure you feel the entire breast and chest area from collarbone to tummy, including your armpits. This is a way to feel for lumps, areas that are painful, dimpled, flattened or different from before, or different from the other breast.
4. Some women prefer 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
- an ice pack over the breast may be more effective than warmth
- 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 decrease fluid retention
- taking vitamin B6 (pyridoxine), vitamin B1 (thiamine) and/or evening primrose oil may help
- relaxation exercises, meditation and mindfulness to calm the mind and body

### When to see your doctor

- New lump
- New lumpiness
- Changes in breast shape or colour
- Changes in the nipple
- Discharge from your nipple
- Puckering or dimpling of breast skin
- Persistent pain in one breast
- Any persistent nipple or breast itching or rash

For more information go to [jeanhailes.org/health-a-z/breast-health](http://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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**Jean Hailes**  
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1800 JEAN HAILES (532 642)  
[jeanhailes.org.au](http://jeanhailes.org.au)