

BREAST LUMPS

What do breasts normally feel like?

It is normal for breasts to feel slightly lumpy or uneven. Factors such as age, the menstrual cycle, pregnancy, breastfeeding, birth control or menopause cause a woman's breasts to change throughout her life. That is why it is important for a woman to get into the habit of regularly checking her breasts. It keeps her familiar with these normal changes.

What is the most common type of benign [non cancerous] breast lump?

Prior to and during the menstrual period, tenderness, pain, and/or lumps in the breast are very common. At this time of the month, she experiences a surge in female hormones—estrogen, progesterone and prolactin. This results from extra fluid collecting in the breast tissue. It's nothing to be worried about. The symptoms go away at the end of menses. Once her period starts, her body reabsorbs the excess tissue and fluid. Decreasing salt and caffeine (chocolate, cocoa, coffee, colas, and tea) intake may be helpful in controlling these symptoms.

Why all this talk about normal lumps?

Because breast cancer first announces itself in the form of a lump (unless it's detected early by mammography), and women tend to panic when they find one. In fact, the vast majority of lumps are not cancerous.

How do you know if you have an abnormal breast lump?

By practicing monthly breast self-examination you will become familiar with the feel of your breasts. After you learn what is normal for you, it is easier to notice changes. A lump is unusual if it has not been felt before or if it does not go away after your menstrual period.

What should you do if you find a lump?

If you find a new lump or some other change in your breasts and it does not go away after your period, don't let fear keep you from seeking medical evaluation. Eight of 10 breast lumps are NOT cancerous. You should consult a nurse practitioner, gynecologist, general practitioner, or family doctor. Depending upon what they find, you may be referred for mammography (low level xray), aspiration, or biopsy.

Are all lumps the same?

* A squishy, movable lump that feels like a grape and stands out from the general lumpiness is probably a cyst. These fluid-filled sacs are caused when milk ducts become plugged and do not drain. Cysts may be painful, but they do not cause cancer. And they usually disappear when your period arrives.

* A lump that doesn't move and feels hard like a dried bean or pea is cause for concern. Hard, nonmovable lumps *can* (but don't always) contain cancerous cells.

* Movable, marblelike lumps are probably noncancerous swellings known as fibroadenomas. Firm, irregular clumps of breast tissue are probably caused by a breast injury or a boil near the breast's surface. And a swollen wedge-shaped area near the nipple is probably an infected milk duct.

Which women have the greatest risk of developing breast cancer?

- Women over 50 years old
- Those whose mothers or sister(s) have had breast cancer
- Women with a previous history of breast disease

- Women who have never been pregnant, or who have had children after age 34
- Women who are obese, smoke, or consume high fat diets.

Because more than 70% of all breast cancers are found by women themselves, you should learn how to examine your breasts. As you do this, you will develop more confidence in knowing how your breast normally feel and will be able to recognize any abnormalities.

If you don't know how to examine your own breasts, ask your health care provider. It's easy to learn.

A service of the Klotz Student Health Center's Health Promotion Dept.

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