Breast Problems and Self Exam

Completing monthly breast exams may pick up problems early and save lives. There can be numerous causes of swelling, tenderness or lumps in the breasts. Some of these causes are:

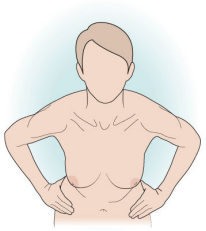
- Fibrocystic breast syndrome (*noncancerous lumps*). This is the most common cause of lumps in the breast.
- Fibroadenoma breast tumors of unknown cause. These are noncancerous (*benign*) lumps.
- Benign fatty tumors (*lipomas*).
- Cancer of the breast.

By doing monthly breast exams, you get to know how your breasts feel and how they can change from month to month. This allows you to notice changes early. It can also offer you some reassurance that your breast health is good.

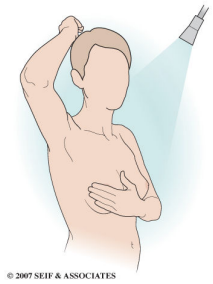
BREAST SELF EXAM

There are a few points to follow when doing a thorough breast exam. The best time to examine your breasts is 5 to 7 days after your menstrual period is over. During menstruation, the breasts are lumpier, and it may be more difficult to pick up changes. If you do not menstruate, have reached menopause, or had a hysterectomy (*uterus removal*), examine your breasts the first day of every month. After 3 to 4 months, you will become more familiar with the variations of your breasts and more comfortable with the exam.

- Perform your breast exam monthly. Keep a written record with breast changes or normal findings for each breast. This makes it easier to be sure of changes, so you do not need to depend only on memory for size, tenderness, or location. Try to do the exam at the same time each month, and write down where you are in your menstrual cycle, if you are still menstruating.

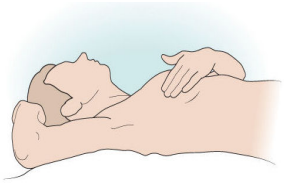


- Look at your breasts. Stand in front of a mirror with your hands clasped behind your head. Tighten your chest muscles and look for asymmetry. This means a difference in shape or contour from one breast to the other, such as puckers, dips or bumps. Also, look for skin changes.



- Lean forward with your hands on your hips. Again, look for symmetry and skin changes.

- While showering, soap the breasts. Then, carefully feel the breasts with your fingertips, while holding the other arm (on the side of the breast you are examining) over your head. Do this with each breast, carefully feeling for lumps or changes. Typically, a circular motion with moderate fingertip pressure should be used.



- Repeat this exam while lying on your back. Put your arm behind your head and a pillow under your shoulders. Again, use your fingertips to examine both breasts, feeling for lumps and thickening. Begin at the top of your breast, and go clockwise around the whole breast.

- At the end of your exam, gently squeeze each nipple to see if there is any drainage of fluids. Look for nipple changes, dimpling, or redness.

- Lastly, examine the upper chest and collarbone (*clavicle*) areas, and in your armpits.

It is not necessary to be alarmed if you find a breast lump. Most of them are not cancerous. However, it is necessary to see your caregiver if a lump is found, in order to have it looked at.

Document Released: 12/18/2006 Document Re-Released: 01/09/2011

ExitCare® Patient Information ©2011 ExitCare, LLC.