

Breast lumps or changes are a common health worry for most women. Women may have many kinds of breast lumps and other breast changes throughout their lives, including changes that occur with menstrual periods, pregnancy, and aging. Most breast lumps and breast changes are normal.

Every woman should perform a BSE once a month. Because breasts can be more tender, swollen, and lumpy prior to your period, the best time to do the exam is day 5 to day 7 of your menstrual cycle (5 to 7 days after your period starts).

If you take oral contraceptives or hormones, check your breasts before starting a new pack of pills. Continue to examine your breasts during pregnancy, even though your breasts might feel lumpier and more swollen than usual; although rare, breast cancer can appear while you are pregnant. If you've had a hysterectomy or have passed menopause, you should schedule a BSE for the first day of each month.

You may feel embarrassed about examining your breasts -- especially if you haven't done so in the past. Remember that you should know your body better than anyone else, and a BSE allows you to become better acquainted with the unique appearance and texture of your own breasts. Noncancerous breast conditions are common in many women, and regular BSEs can help you to distinguish between "normal" and "suspicious" tissue. In fact, some experts recommend that, initially, women conduct a BSE every day for a month until they learn the "geography" of their breasts.

If you don't know how to get started, your doctor can provide you with additional information that describes the structure of the breast and the composition of its tissue. Your doctor may also have a model that allows you to feel the differences between breast lumps and the normal glandular tissue involved in milk production, as well as underlying fatty tissue.