

# Breast awareness

# Contents

The breast	2
Breast development and ageing	4
Normal changes and benign breast conditions	5
Being breast aware	5
What changes should I be aware of?	6
What shall I do if I find a change?	6
Screening for breast cancer	7

We hope this booklet will help you to understand the normal development and ageing process of the breast and the normal changes that can occur at various times throughout your life. It will also help you to be breast aware, so that you notice any changes that are unusual for you. While most breast changes will be benign (non-cancerous), detecting a change early means that if cancer is diagnosed any treatment may be more successful.

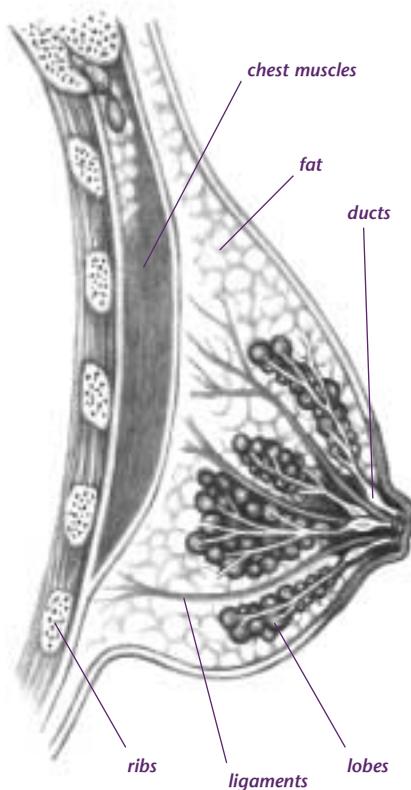
Although this booklet is for women, men also need to be aware of any changes in their breast tissue, as approximately 300 men in the UK get breast cancer each year.

## The breast

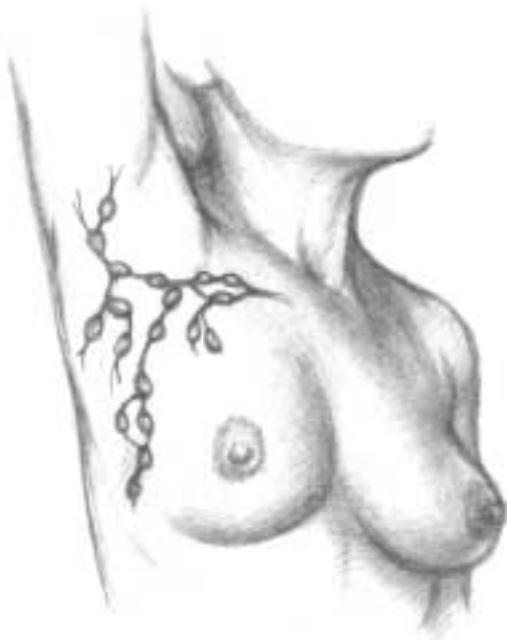
The breasts, also known as mammary glands, are a pair of glandular organs that produce milk in response to the hormone changes of childbirth. They are mainly made up of fatty tissue that starts high on the front of the chest and extends down and around into the armpit. They are supported by ligaments and large muscles.

Each breast has 15-20 lobes with a number of lobules and ducts surrounded by fatty and supportive tissue. Each lobule has about 30 major ducts that open onto the nipple. The darker area of skin around the nipple is called the areola. At the edge of the areola there are large glands that produce fluid to lubricate the nipple.

In each armpit there are about 20-30 lymph nodes (glands) that drain fluid from the breast. These form part of the lymphatic system that helps the body to fight infection.



*The breast*



*Lymph nodes*

It is common for one breast to be larger than the other and this is perfectly normal. The nipples usually point forward, although they may look different on each breast. It is not unusual for one or both nipples to be turned inwards (inverted). This can be present from birth or can happen when the breasts are developing. The nipples themselves are hairless, but some women may have a few hairs around the areola.

A small number of women have an extra breast or pair of breasts, known as accessory breasts. These are usually in the lower armpit. Some women have an extra nipple or nipples. These are usually below the breast or above the belly button. Accessory breasts and extra nipples are not usually a problem and do not need to be removed.

# Breast development and ageing

The breasts are constantly changing from the time of puberty, through adolescence, the child-bearing years and then the menopause (change of life), affected by changing levels in the female hormone oestrogen.

Most girls' breasts start to develop around the age of 9-11, but it can be earlier or later. It is not unusual for the breasts to grow at different rates. Breast lumps can occur while the breasts are developing. These are always benign and don't usually need any treatment once they have been diagnosed.

When the breasts have developed, changes related to the monthly menstrual cycle (cyclical breast changes) are common. Just before a period your breasts may become larger, tender or feel a bit lumpy. After a period this lumpiness becomes less obvious or may disappear altogether (although some women may have tender, lumpy breasts all the time). Many women also have breast pain linked to their menstrual cycle (cyclical breast pain). For more information see our *Breast pain* booklet.

During pregnancy the breasts get much larger as the number of milk-producing cells increases. The nipples become darker and may remain that way following pregnancy.

Around the menopause lumps are common, and these often turn out to be breast cysts (benign fluid-filled sacs). For more information see our *Breast cysts* leaflet.

Breast tissue changes with age. It begins to lose its firmness and the milk-producing tissue is replaced by fat, making the breasts sag. This is more noticeable after the menopause when oestrogen levels fall and periods have stopped. As you grow older your breasts may change size. If you take HRT (hormone replacement therapy) your breasts may feel firmer and sometimes quite tender.

## Normal changes and benign breast conditions

When women go to their GP with a breast problem, it is most likely to be a normal change associated with the developing or ageing breast. These changes can include tenderness/pain, lumps/lumpiness and nipple problems. However, sometimes such changes may be diagnosed as benign breast conditions. For example, breast pain linked to the menstrual cycle is common and usually seen as normal. When it is severe and long lasting it is seen as abnormal and something that needs treatment.

## Being breast aware

Breast awareness is an important part of caring for your body. Being breast aware is about becoming familiar with your breasts and the changes that they go through throughout your life. It means knowing how your breasts look and feel normally so that you notice any change that might be unusual for you.

Get into the habit of looking at and feeling your breasts from time to time. There is no set way to do this. You can decide what you are comfortable with and when it is convenient for you. You don't have to look and feel at the same time.



### The breast awareness 5-point code

1. Know what is normal for you
2. Know what changes to look and feel for
3. Look and feel
4. Report any changes to your GP without delay
5. Attend for routine breast screening if you are aged 50 or over

## What changes should I be aware of?

You need to be aware of any changes that are new or different for you, such as:

- a change in size – it may be that one breast has become noticeably larger or noticeably lower
- a nipple has become inverted (pulled in) or changed its position or shape
- a rash on or around the nipple
- discharge from one or both nipples
- puckering or dimpling of the skin
- a swelling under your armpit or around your collarbone (where the lymph nodes are)
- a lump or thickening in your breast that feels different from the rest of the breast tissue
- constant pain in one part of your breast or in your armpit.

## What shall I do if I find a change?

You will know better than anyone how your breasts look and feel normally, so if you do notice a change, see your GP. Don't worry that you may be making an unnecessary fuss, and remember that most breast changes will not be cancer, even if they sometimes do need treatment or follow-up.

When your GP examines your breasts s/he may be able to reassure you that there is nothing to worry about. (If s/he thinks the change may be connected with your hormones, your GP may ask you to come back at a different time in your menstrual cycle.)

Alternatively, s/he may decide to send you to a breast clinic for a more detailed examination. For more information about what happens at a breast clinic and the tests used to make a diagnosis, see our *Referral to a breast clinic* booklet.

## Screening for breast cancer

If you are diagnosed with a benign breast problem, either by your GP or at the breast clinic, you may want more information about it. Breast Cancer Care has leaflets about the most common benign breast conditions – see our publications list for details or ring the helpline.

Eighty per cent of breast cancers occur in women over the age of 50. So if you are between 50 and 70 you will be invited for breast screening every three years as part of the National Breast Screening Programme. (The upper age limit has been extended from 64 to 70 and this will come into effect in all areas from 2004.) Your name will be taken from your GP's list and you will be sent an invitation to come for a mammogram (breast x-ray). This may not happen the year you turn 50 but it will happen by the time you are 53. It is important to remember that you still need to be breast aware even when you are taking part in the screening programme. Report any changes to your GP without delay, even if you have had a recent mammogram.

A small number of women will be asked to come back for further investigations after having a routine mammogram. This doesn't necessarily mean that you have breast cancer. It may be because the mammogram is unclear, or because it shows up something that needs

further tests. If you are sent a recall letter it is important to attend the appointment.

If you are over 70 (or 65 or over in areas where the new age limit has not yet come into effect) you will not be invited for screening.

However, you are still at risk of breast cancer and entitled to free breast screening every three years on request. All you need to do is contact the breast-screening unit, or you can ask your GP or practice nurse to arrange an appointment for you.

You can find out where your local breast-screening unit is by calling NHS Direct on 0845 4647 (or the NHS Helpline on 0800 224488 in Scotland), by contacting your GP practice or visiting [www.breastcancercare.org.uk/connect](http://www.breastcancercare.org.uk/connect).

At present women under the age of 50 are not invited for screening as part of the NHS programme. This is because screening has not yet been shown to benefit this age group.

If you want **more information** or **practical advice** about being breast aware, contact the **practice nurse at your GP surgery**.



Breast Cancer Care is the UK's leading provider of information, practical assistance and emotional support for anyone affected by breast cancer. Every year we reach over 750,000 people with breast cancer or breast health concerns. All our services are free.

**For more information call the Breast Cancer Care helpline free on 0808 800 6000 (textphone 0808 800 6001) or visit [www.breastcancercare.org.uk](http://www.breastcancercare.org.uk).**

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ISBN 1 870577 46 9

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Design Sue MacDonald  
Illustrations © Alexa Rutherford  
Print Alpine Press Ltd