

BREAST SELF-EXAMINATION (BSE)



Breast cancer is the most common cancer among women in Singapore. All women are at risk of developing breast cancer – this risk increases with age and/or if you have a family member who has had breast cancer.

Regular screening and performing regular breast self-examination (BSE) are important for early detection of breast cancer, as there may not be any symptoms in the early stages of the disease. BSE can empower women to take responsibility for their own health and to raise awareness among women about breast cancer. The good news is that early detection can increase your chance of survival.

What is BSE and why should women do it?

BSE is a simple and effective way for women to recognize the very early signs and symptoms of breast cancer.

By performing BSE on a regular basis, you will get to know and familiarize yourself with the normal feel of your breasts so that any new sudden changes can be more readily picked up.

How often should I perform BSE?

BSE should be performed once a month. It is a simple procedure to undertake and should only take you several minutes to perform.

The best time to do a BSE is about a week after your last menstrual period. Your breasts are less tender and lumpier as the hormone levels are relatively stable.

For women on the birth control pills, the start of the new pack should remind you to perform a BSE.

For women with irregular periods, it is easier to choose a date like at the beginning of the month and mark this on the calendar and add a reminder on your phone.

How do I perform a BSE?

- In the privacy of your bathroom, remove the upper part of your clothing and stand in front of a mirror so that you can see both breasts clearly.

LOOKING

- Place your hands on both hips, press firmly and lean slightly forward.
- Look for any general changes in the contour, size and shape of both breasts.
- Look for any recent asymmetry like swelling or shrinkage of the breast (especially if on one side only).
- Look for any skin changes such as redness, tethering, puckering or dimpling of the skin.
- Look for any changes in the nipples – eg inward or inverted nipple or if the skin of the nipple and surrounding area (the areola) looks scaly, red and swollen.
- Look again for all these changes with your arms raised above your head.

FEELING

- Standing, with your right hand behind your head, use your left hand to check your right breast.
- Use the pads of your fingers and apply gentle pressure to the right breast.
- Start at the upper outer quadrant of the right breast and feel in small circular motions – make sure you cover the whole breast.
- Note for any changes in texture, warmth or pain in the breast or a mass that is painless, hard or with an irregular edge.

- Switch sides and place your left hand behind your head and use your right hand to check your left breast.
- You can also stand in the shower to perform the BSE as some women will find the wet skin have less resistance and your fingers will glide more easily over it.

CHECK THE NIPPLES

- Look for any changes in the nipples – eg inward or inverted nipple or if the skin of the nipple and the surrounding area (the areola) looks scaly, red and swollen.
- Squeeze both nipples to check for any abnormal discharge especially bloody stained nipple discharge.

LYING DOWN

- You can repeat the process lying down. Place your right hand behind your head. Use your left hand to check the right breast and underarm area for any enlarged lymph nodes.
- Repeat on the other side.

What should I do if I find a lump?

Do not panic straight away! Just because you find a lump or noticed a change in your breast does not mean you have breast cancer. There could be many benign (non-cancerous) causes. If you have any concerns about what you have noticed during a routine BSE, then book an appointment to see your own doctor for a detailed clinical breast examination and further testing should this be required.

Protect yourself from breast cancer

- The best way to protect yourself from breast cancer is by performing monthly BSE so that you are aware of any new sudden changes to your breasts.
- Mark on your calendar or place a reminder on your phone to do your monthly BSE.
- Remember to stay calm and relaxed during your BSE.
- If you notice any new changes, unusual pain or a lump – don't panic. Schedule an appointment with your doctor at your earliest opportunity.
- If your monthly BSE remains normal, remember to have an annual clinical breast examination (CBE) done by your doctor who will advise you if further investigations are needed.
- After a certain age, your doctor will advise you to return at regular intervals for a CBE as well as mammogram and/breast ultrasound scan screening. Remember, screening is key for early detection of breast cancer.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding BSE or any new changes noted in your breasts, please consult your doctor for further advice.