

NORMAL CHANGES IN YOUR BREASTS



the women's
the royal women's hospital
victoria australia

Breasts change a lot over a woman's life. This information sheet will explain what normal changes are and why they have occurred.

Some common reasons for breast change are:

- » pregnancy
- » breastfeeding
- » hormonal changes over each menstrual cycle
- » weight loss or gain
- » ageing.

At some stage in their lives, many women have a change in their breast that is different to their usual hormonal changes. Most of these changes are not cancerous or harmful, but it's important that a doctor checks them to make sure.

You visited a doctor recently for a medical opinion on a change in your breast. All the information that the doctor collected shows that your breast is free of disease. The change in your breast might be unusual for you, but it is not a sign of cancer or any other disease.

How does the doctor know it's not cancer

To be confident that your breast change is not cancer or another disease, your doctor will have considered:

- » your age and family history
- » the history of the breast change
- » the results of a physical examination and any ultrasounds, mammograms or other tests that were needed
- » whether you are still having periods or taking Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT).

Why do breasts change

Breasts are made up of milk systems, fat, lymph nodes, veins and nerves. They do not have muscles, but there is some fibrous tissue. Lumps, tissue that feels like a rope or a thick cord, or dense masses of tissue are usually natural and normal.

Usually, normal breast changes develop slowly. They can become noticeable quite suddenly.

Breasts are very responsive to hormones in the menstrual cycle or in HRT. Hormones called oestrogens increase before a period, causing milk ducts and glands to swell. This can trap fluid in the breasts and cause swelling and lumpiness.

Young women usually have dense breasts because their milk systems might be needed for feeding babies. Sometimes this thickness is felt as a lump or a mass of tissue.

As women age, their milk systems shrink and are replaced by fat. By menopause, most women's breasts are completely soft. This can make normal lumps more noticeable.

Sometimes women find their breasts feel different when they lose or gain weight.

Sometimes breasts change for no obvious reason. Your doctor might not be able to explain why the change in your breast has happened. If you feel frustrated by this, it is important to talk openly about your feelings with your doctor and other supportive people.

What happens now?

The change that you have in your breast does not put you at any increased risk of breast cancer.

You should follow the recommendations for screening for breast cancer for women of your age and family history.

All women need to be alert to any changes in their breasts that are not usual for them. If you have any further change in your breast that is different to your usual hormonal changes, you should have it checked by your doctor.

Feelings

For most women, having an unusual breast change is upsetting. It can bring up many different feelings and worries. It's understandable to fear cancer. It's also common to find tests stressful and invasive.

Most of the time women feel relieved to know that their breast change is not cancerous or harmful. Sometimes, however, women keep worrying about getting cancer. Some find that their breast change affects how they feel about themselves, their sexuality or relationships.

If your breast change is having a negative impact on your life, it might help to share your feelings with supportive family members or friends. You could also get information or advice from your GP or a Women's Health Nurse at your local community health centre. You are welcome to talk with a specialist or Breast Care Nurse at a Breast Clinic if you feel this would help to put your mind at rest.

You and your General Practitioner (GP)

If you have recently seen a specialist at a Breast Clinic, it is a good idea to visit your GP afterwards.

That way, you can make sure you fully understand any information, tests or diagnosis that the specialist gave you.

It's also a good chance to talk about what you are thinking and feeling about your breast change or diagnosis.

Your GP can also help you if you would like a second opinion about your breast change.

If you don't have a regular GP, ask friends, family or your local community health centre for some suggestions. It's good to have a regular GP who you know and trust.

Language link

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