

# Finding breast cancer early: A guide to breast health

**More women survive breast cancer today. This is because it is found earlier, and there are better treatments available.**

**However, it is still the most common cancer among Australian women. About 12,000 women are diagnosed each year.**

**In this guide to breast health, we recommend:**

1. Get to know the normal look and feel of your breasts.
2. See your doctor if you notice any unusual changes.
3. Have a free mammogram at BreastScreen every two years if you are aged 50 to 69.

## **How can I get to know the normal look and feel of my breasts?**

Getting to know your breasts is important for women of all ages. It becomes more important as you get older.

If you know how your breasts normally look and feel, you are more likely to notice any unusual changes. These could be, but are not always, a sign of breast cancer.

Many breast cancers are found by a woman or her doctor after noticing a change in the breast.

There is no right or wrong way to examine your breasts. It is important to find a way that works for you.

## **We suggest:**

- Look in a mirror to get to know the usual look and shape of your breasts.
- Become familiar with the feel of your breasts at different times of the month. You might find this easiest in the shower or bath, lying in bed, or when getting dressed.
- Feel the entire breast, from the collarbone to below the bra line, and under the armpit.
- Use the pads of your fingers, feel the breast lightly, and then with more pressure.

## **What sort of changes should I look for?**

It is important to see your doctor if you feel or see:

- a lump, lumpiness or thickening in the breast or armpit
- changes in the skin – dimpling, puckering (a gathering of the skin) or redness
- changes in the nipple – pointing in (unless it has always been this way), a change in direction or an unusual discharge
- an area that feels different from the rest
- unusual pain.

Nine out of 10 breast changes are not breast cancer. However, it is important to have any changes examined by your doctor.

## What are the risk factors for getting breast cancer?

The two main risk factors are:

- being a woman
- getting older.

Other things that increase the risk are having:

- a mother, sister or daughter who have had breast or ovarian cancer, particularly before the age of 50
- had breast or ovarian cancer in the past.

Most breast cancers are found in women over 50. Breast cancer is less common in women under 40. However, it is important for all women to be aware of changes to their breasts.

## How can I lower my risk of getting breast cancer?

You can help lower your risk by:

- having a healthy weight (waistline under 85cm)
- being physically active
- limiting or avoiding alcohol.

We recommend eating a healthy diet and exercising for 30 to 60 minutes each day.

## How does breast cancer screening help?

In Australia, all women aged 50 to 69 are invited to have a free screening mammogram (breast x-ray) at BreastScreen every two years.

Breast screening is the best way to find breast cancer before you feel or notice symptoms.

Screening mammograms find most breast cancers which are there at the time of the x-ray. However, mammograms are not perfect. Some women might have further testing or treatment for changes, which are not due to breast cancer. For a small

number of women, a breast cancer that is there may not be found.

Some breast cancers can develop between mammograms. This is why being aware of your breasts is so important.

If you are unsure about your risk of breast cancer or whether to have a breast screening mammogram, you should speak to your doctor.

## What if I am in my 40s, or over 70?

If you are in this group, you are still able to have free screening mammograms with BreastScreen every two years.

## BreastScreen appointments and information

Call 13 20 50

Visit [www.breastscreen.org.au](http://www.breastscreen.org.au)

## Multilingual Cancer Information Line

To talk confidentially with a cancer nurse in your preferred language, with the help of an interpreter, follow these steps:

1. Call the Translating and Interpreting Service on 13 14 50, Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm.
2. Say the language you need.
3. Wait on the line for an interpreter (may take up to 3 minutes).
4. Ask the interpreter to contact the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20.
5. You will be connected to the interpreter and a cancer nurse.

Visit [www.cancervic.org.au/multilingual](http://www.cancervic.org.au/multilingual) for more cancer information in your language, or for this fact sheet in other languages.

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