

# Checking for breast cancer

**Most lumps women feel in their breasts are not cancer, but some are.**

**SPEAK looks at breast cancer**

## ● What is cancer?

**Our bodies are made up of cells which divide. This is natural. But sometimes the cells start to divide in an uncontrolled way and a tumour or growth forms. If the growth stays where it is and does not spread it is called 'benign'. This means it is not cancer and can be removed easily. If, however, it spreads through the lymph vessels and blood to other parts of the body, it is called malignant or cancer.**

**I**n South Africa, one in every 15 women stands a chance of getting breast cancer. According to the Cancer Association of South Africa, the number of women, especially young women, getting breast cancer is increasing. It is important that all women keep in touch with their bodies and changes which may occur.

### Be aware

A woman's breasts are naturally lumpy. They can also change size when weight is gained or lost. A woman's breast can change after breastfeeding. Many of these changes are normal and should not cause worry.

### Keep healthy — breast self-examinations

The Cancer Association of South Africa says women should examine their breasts themselves every month and go to a doctor once a year for a breast examination.

The best time for a woman to examine her breasts is straight

after her monthly period.

Women who do not get periods, should do it on the first day of every month.

*See our drawing on how to do a breast self-examination.*

All breasts are naturally lumpy because they are made up of tiny bags and pipes that make milk. Many women worry that painful, lumpy breasts are a sign of breast cancer. This is usually not true. Many women have painful breasts, especially before and during their monthly period.

When doing a breast self-examination, look out for these changes:

#### On your breast:

- A change in shape or size;
- A change in the look of the skin on your breast. For example, if it gets dimples on it and looks like the skin of an orange;
- Lumps or thickening anywhere on your breast.

#### On your nipple look out for:

- A discharge of blood, water, pus or milk (if you are not breastfeeding);
- Whether the nipple pulls in (becomes inverted);
- Whether there is a rash on or around your nipple;
- A lump or thickening;
- A change in the feel and look of your nipple.

#### On your arm look out for:

- A swelling of your upper arm;
- A swelling in your armpit or above your breast.

If you find any of these, do not panic. It may not necessarily be cancer. There are other diseases and problems which can cause these. But if you do discover a new lump or change which does not go away, go to a doctor or clinic for advice. The doctor may do a biopsy —

where some breast tissue is removed so the cells can be examined under a microscope to see whether it is benign or malignant.

### **Mammograms**

Mammograms are another way of testing for abnormal lumps in the breast. Mammograms are a type of X-ray. They are expensive and are usually only done on women who are at high risk of breast cancer.

### **Who can get breast cancer?**

All women have a chance of getting breast cancer but some women have a greater chance than others. Those more likely to get breast cancer are women who:

- Are over 50 years old;
- Have never given birth to children or who have had children after the age of 35;
- Have a close female relative, like a mother or sister, with breast cancer;
- Began to menstruate at a very early age, like under twelve years old;
- Started their change of life (menopause) late in life;
- Are very overweight.

### **Dealing with breast cancer**

If a woman has breast cancer there are different steps to take, depending on how far it has spread. In some cases, surgeons may feel it is necessary to remove the lump in a small operation (a lumpectomy) or to remove the breast in an operation called a mastectomy. In other cases, chemotherapy (treatment with anti-cancer drugs) or radiotherapy (treatment with high energy rays like



**Many women are too scared to examine their breasts. Try not to be scared and make it part of your life. If there is something wrong, the earlier you find it, the easier it is to treat**

X-rays) may also be used.

Whatever happens, a woman has a right to decide what treatment she wants.

### **Prevention is better than cure**

Many health workers believe there is a strong link between leading a stressful life and getting cancer. When you are stressed, your ability to fight disease is lessened and your body is more open to getting sick. Try to deal with stress in such a way that it does not take over your life. Work through issues and train yourself to be a calm person. Don't take on all the work at home — share it with others. Take time to relax and exercise every day, whether it is to read a book or sit quietly on your own. Even dancing

around a room to music you love is good for you! Try to always get a good night's sleep.

### **Eat right**

We know that it is easy to say 'eat right' but not easy to do if you do not have the money. Try to have a balanced diet.

- Cut down on foods which have preservatives, like artificial colouring or flavouring. Tinned foods usually have lots of preservatives;
- Eat raw, clean vegetables and fruit;
- Buy brown or wholewheat bread;
- Cut down on red meat and try to eat more chicken and fish;
- Cut down on salt;
- Eat foods with vitamin C, for example, oranges, carrots and broccoli;
- Stop smoking and cut down on alcohol intake;
- Cut down on the amount of fat you eat. Breast cancer is far more common in countries where people eat a lot of fat.

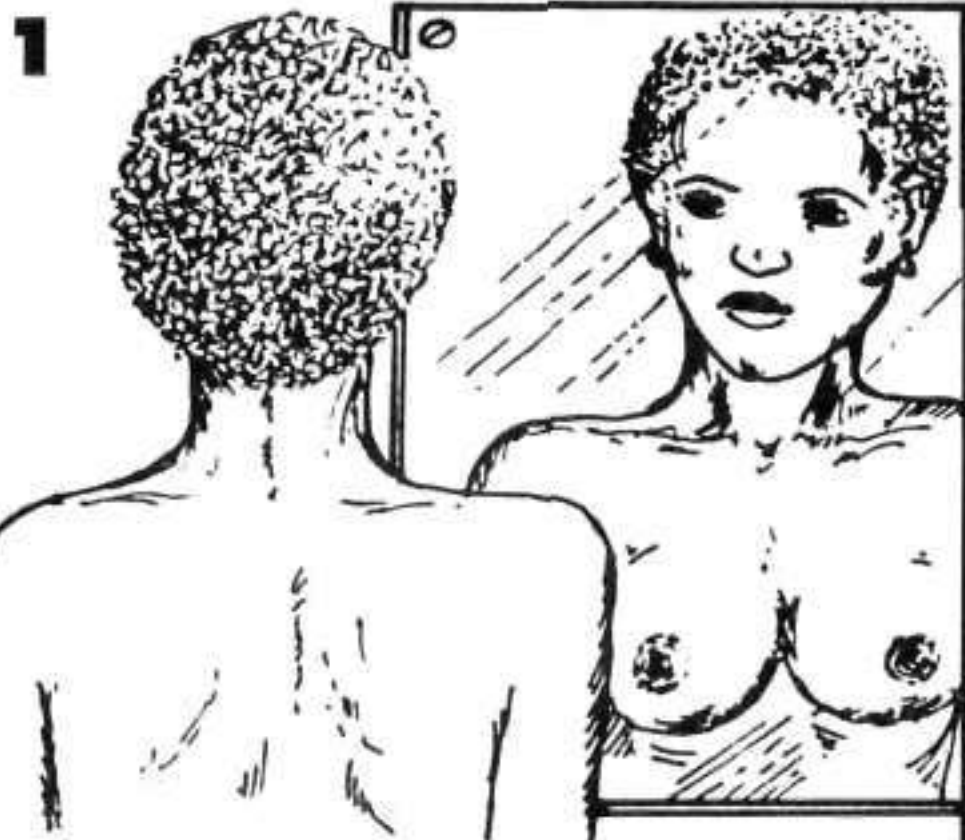
Many women are too scared to examine their breasts. Try not to be scared and just make it part of your life. The earlier you find something wrong, the easier it is to treat. You may never find something wrong — but at least you are in touch with your own body. ☘

*It is National Cancer Week from 31 July to 7 August this year. There is a special focus on breast cancer (See page 35).*

*Reach for Recovery is a support group for women who have breast cancer. For more information write to:*

*The Cancer Association of South Africa, PO Box 2000, Johannesburg, 2000. Or phone your local Cancer Association of South Africa branch. You can ask them to send you pamphlets*

# Examine your breasts every month after your period



**1**  
Look at your breasts in front of a mirror. If your breasts look different, you must go to a doctor



**2**  
Lie in the bath or lie back in bed. Use your right hand to feel your left breast, and then your left hand to feel your right breast



**3**  
Start at the outside of your breast. Roll the breast under your fingertips, move down and inwards until you have felt all of your breast. Don't forget to feel over the nipple



**4**  
If your breasts are big then use both hands to examine. Roll the breast between your fingertips

## SIGNS

- Go to the clinic if you feel any new lumps in your breasts
- Go to the clinic if you find blood, milk (unless you are breastfeeding), or pus coming out of the nipple;
- Go to the clinic if your breasts suddenly look different