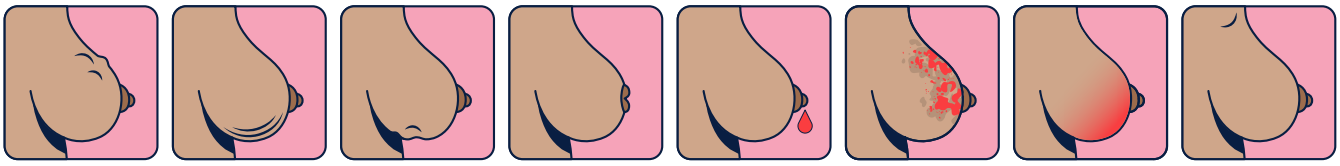
Medline supports breast cancer patients all year long in partnership with Think Pink Europe.

Recognising the signs and understanding the causes of breast cancer

Recognising the signs of breast cancer starts with understanding what's normal for you. While most changes you notice are unlikely to be a cause for concern, it's important not to ignore anything that feels unusual.



A lump in the breast | Swelling of all or part of the breast | Dimpled or depressed skin | Nipple changes and inversion | Bloody discharge | Skin irritation or texture change | Redness & heat | Visible lump on armpit

There isn't a single cause of breast cancer, and in many cases it's not possible to say exactly why it occurs. What we do know is that it begins when cells in the breast develop changes in their DNA, causing them to grow and divide uncontrollably. Over time, these abnormal cells can form a tumour and, if left untreated, spread to other parts of the body.

Although the exact trigger isn't always clear, evidence reviewed by the World Cancer Research Fund suggests that breast cancer develops as a result of a combination of genetic, hormonal and environmental factors[1].

Genetic factors

Genetic factors passed down through families, as well as a family history of breast cancer, can increase the likelihood of developing the disease.

Hormonal factors

Lifetime exposure to hormones such as oestrogen can influence breast cancer risk. Factors including age, when periods began and ended, pregnancy history, and hormone replacement therapy (HRT) all affect hormone exposure over a lifetime and may increase the risk of developing breast cancer.

Environmental and lifestyle factors

Alcohol consumption, obesity, physical inactivity and exposure to ionizing radiation may all contribute to an increased risk.

For more information about breast cancer, including its symptoms, causes and risk factors, visit the World Health Organization's breast cancer fact sheet.

Source:
1. World Cancer Research Fund (WCRF). https://www.wcrf.org/preventing-cancer/cancer-types/breast-cancer/causes/

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Understanding breast cancer risk factors

While there's no guaranteed way to prevent breast cancer, understanding the factors that increase your risk can help you look after your health. Although some risk factors can't be changed, others are linked to lifestyle and may be within your control.

These factors include:

Maintaining a Healthy Weight

Gaining weight increases post-menopausal breast cancer risk. A BMI of 18-25 lowers this risk. Losing 5% body weight can cut the risk by 25-40%. Stay healthy!

Regular Exercise

Exercise lowers breast cancer risk.

Aim for 5 sessions/week, 35-45 mins each.

Even brisk walks help.

Know your risk

Age,
Family history,
Lifestyle,
matter!

Reduce your alcohol intake

Limit alcohol to reduce breast cancer risk.

Drink no more than 14 units/ week, spread over 3+ days.

Check yourself & take action

Check yourself regularly.

Spot changes. See your GP for concerns.

Book your breast screening.

Factors you can't change

These include your age, family history, genetics, and hormonal and reproductive factors that influence your lifetime exposure to oestrogen. While these factors can affect your overall level of risk, they don't mean you'll develop breast cancer.

Lowering your risk

Although breast cancer can't always be prevented, maintaining a healthy lifestyle may help reduce your risk. Staying aware of your breast health, attending recommended breast screening, and speaking to a healthcare professional if you notice any unusual changes are all important steps.

For more information about cancer prevention, visit the World Health Organization's Preventing cancer page.

Source:
1. World Health Organization (WHO) https://www.who.int/activities/preventing-cancer?utm_source

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How to carry out a breast self-check

Familiarity with how your breasts normally look and feel can help you notice any unusual changes. Regularly checking your breasts is a simple way to stay breast aware and may help you recognise changes that should be checked by a healthcare professional.

The following steps will guide you through how to check your breasts.

Look for any changes

Stand in front of a mirror and look carefully at your breasts, first with your arms by your sides and then with your arms raised. Check for any changes in size or shape, as well as anything unusual around the skin or nipples.

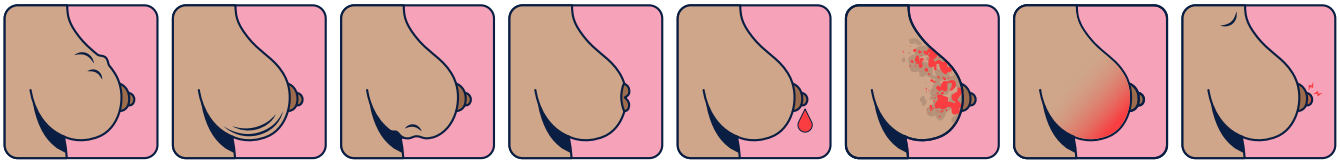
Feel each breast

Using your fingertips, feel around each breast in a circular motion. Check the whole breast area, including up to your collarbone and underneath each armpit. Use light and firmer pressure as you check, but don't press hard enough to cause discomfort.

Check your nipples

Feel around and over each nipple, checking for anything that looks or feels different from what's normal for you. Try to check your breasts regularly, around once a month, so you become familiar with how they normally look and feel. You may find it easier to check them in the shower or while lying down. If you notice a lump, swelling or any other change that isn't normal for you, speak to a healthcare professional.

When should you be alarmed?



A lump or a swelling in the breast or in the armpit | A change in size or shape of the breast | A dimple or withdrawal | A retracted or an inverted nipple | Fluid from the nipple | Pain or a poorly healing wound | An inflamed, red breast that is warm to the touch | Scaling and redness of the nipple

When breast cancer is detected early, the chances for survival are much higher.

For a video guide on how to perform a breast self-examination, please watch this instruction video from the UK's National Health Service.

Source:
1. NHS (National Health Service) https://www.nhs.uk/tests-and-treatments/how-to-check-your-breasts-or-chest/

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