

"Ask a Doctor" article

Should I be worried if I feel a lump in my breast?

Yes, but don't panic. Early diagnosis results in easier treatments and better outcomes. Although most lumps do not turn out to be cancerous, all lumps in the breast do require further investigation. Younger women may experience a tender lump during their monthly period that is actually a fluid-filled cyst and will usually go away within one cycle. In this case, it's safe to observe the lump for one month. If the lump persists, however, you should have it checked by your physician. For older women, and in other cases, any new lump must be evaluated immediately by a knowledgeable physician. There should be no changes in an older woman's breast.

Your physician will examine you and look for signs of cancer, including changes to the skin and in the armpit. A diagnostic mammogram and an ultrasound may be performed to determine if your lump is suspicious. If those tests are inconclusive, an MRI can be used to look at the lump in more detail. If there is any concern that the lump is a cancer, then a biopsy is performed in which a small sample of cells or tissue is removed for examination under a microscope. Only after a biopsy can you be completely sure that a suspicious lump is not a cancer.

If the lump is cancerous, it's important to be seen by an experienced breast cancer team, which often includes your personal physician, an oncologist, a radiation oncologist and a surgeon who specializes in breast surgery. If the team determines that surgery is necessary, your surgeon will carefully review your diagnosis and treatment to date--and then recommend the most effective surgical procedure for you.

One in eight women will develop breast cancer. Some women are at greater risk. Your physician can evaluate what your risk is by reviewing your overall health, your lifestyle (diet, alcohol consumption and exercise), and your history of previous breast problems. Contrary to what many believe, heredity is not a major risk factor. More than 80% of women who get breast cancer do not have a family member with breast cancer.

For women at average risk of getting breast cancer, I recommend yearly mammograms starting at age 40, yearly breast exams by your physician and monthly self-exams. You can also reduce your risk of getting breast cancer by paying attention to your weight, exercising regularly, controlling your alcohol intake and eating more green leafy vegetables.



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