

Breast Cancer – your questions answered

Mr Gerald Gui, Consultant Breast Surgeon at The London Clinic Breast Centre answers some common questions about breast health

Q How important is it for me to check my breasts and have mammograms?

A Whilst it is very important for women to check their breasts regularly, it is comforting to know that the majority of women who do report a self-detected change in the breast eg a lump, do not actually have breast cancer on further investigation.

However, women who have been diagnosed with the earliest forms of breast cancer have normally had this detected by having a mammogram. Therefore, doctors stress the importance of routine mammograms and self breast checks.

Q What is a mammogram and when do I need to have one?

A A mammogram is an examination that uses X-rays of low power to locate abnormal areas in the breast. This technique involves placing and pressing the breast between two plates for a few seconds while the X-rays are performed.

As part of the National Health Service Breast Screening Programme, mammograms are offered to women over the age of 49. However, if women have had a previous abnormal breast biopsy and/or are deemed to have a higher risk due to their family history, they are encouraged to have a mammogram at 40. Women need to remember that screening mammography is an important part of women's health and it contributes significantly to the early detection of breast cancer.

The London Clinic Breast Centre offers women breast screening advice and will tailor the screening for all women dependent on their breast cancer risk assessment and patient choice. The London Clinic also offers women the opportunity to have annual mammograms over the age of 40.

Q Other than lumps in the breast, are there any other symptoms that I can look out for?

A Other symptoms to look out for include:

- unilateral (one sided) persistent breast pain
- asymmetry of the skin leading to dimpling
- differential discoloration of the breast skin compared with the opposite side
- nipple discharge particularly if this is blood stained
- a rash around the nipple

Q Would my diet or lifestyle have any impact on me developing breast cancer?

A There are very few dietary and lifestyle factors that are known to contribute significantly to breast cancer. Although excess alcohol intake and large amounts of animal fats in the diet are considered to be factors that can contribute to a person's breast cancer risk. Being overweight in the post-menopausal age group is also a significant risk factor. Regular exercise is known to be protective against breast cancer.

Q Is it possible for men to develop breast cancer?

A Men can develop breast cancer but this is relatively rare, accounting for less than 1 % of all breast cancers. According to Cancer Research UK (CRUK), around 300 cases are diagnosed each year.

Q How should I check my breasts for lumps?

A Most women in the UK do not actually know how to check their breasts for lumps or any abnormal changes. This is why there is such a high percentage of women self-diagnosing themselves incorrectly. Self-checks can be done standing up or lying down. Many women prefer to self examine in the shower or bath as the wet soapy hand in a warm environment helps you feel the texture of the breast. Some women check their breasts when applying body moisturising lotion. Here are two simple methods for women to use:

The first method has been dubbed the clock method as you will need to envisage your breast as a clock face. With your left hand behind your head, use your right hand to examine your left breast. Put your hand at top of the breast using your middle three fingers in the 12 o'clock position. Use your fingers in a massaging, clockwise motion to check for lumps. Then you move your fingers to go to the next 'hour', using the same motion and feeling for any changes in your breasts. After you have repeated one cycle, move your fingers closer to your nipple and repeat the process until you get to your nipple. Now do the other breast.

The second method is called the wedge method, as you have to envisage your breast divided into wedges. Place your left hand behind your head. Use your right hand to examine your left breast beginning at the top of your breast and working your way down to your nipple. Use your middle three fingers to massage firmly but gently from the top of the wedge to the bottom. Once you have completed the wedge, move your fingers to the next wedge going in a clockwise direction. For the opposite side, put your right hand behind your head and use your left hand to massage your right breast.

Either method is fine to use, but always remember to check for lymph nodes under your armpit and tissue around your breasts. Examine your nipples for discharge as well.

Women who are breast aware will be knowledgeable about how their breasts felt the last time they were self-checked and any distinct change should be reported to your GP straight away.

Q How often should I check my breasts for unnatural changes?

A For most women who have regular periods, a self examination should be done around day five of the menstrual cycle. If a woman has irregular periods, eg one period every two months, or if women have no periods, the easiest option is to check the breasts on a fixed day every month.

Q Are there any risk factors that can contribute to breast cancer that I should be aware of?

A The following factors can contribute to the development of breast cancer:

- Family history – women who have a family history of close relatives having developed breast cancer at a young age, have a higher predisposition to developing breast cancer themselves. The greater the number of relatives affected in one arm of the family (applies equally to maternal and paternal sides of the family), as well as the combination of cancers (for example breast cancer and ovarian cancer) contribute to this elevated risk
- The younger the age of onset of periods and the later the age of a woman when periods cease, increases the breast cancer risk
- Women who have had their children younger are at lower risk of developing breast cancer than those who have their first child at an older age
- Women who breast-feed their children (particularly those who have their children at a younger age) are at lower risk of developing breast cancer
- Women who have had a previous atypical biopsy (where cells show a form of abnormality, but in themselves are not cancerous) have a higher risk of developing breast cancer in the future than those who have had a simple benign breast biopsy
- Taking HRT over the average age of menopause (around 51 years) for a significant duration (generally considered to be greater than five years) has a slightly elevated risk of developing breast cancer
- The oral contraceptive pill contributes little, if any, to breast cancer risk, unless this is taken for a very long period of time (much more than 10 years)

The London Clinic is located on Harley Street, in the heart of the capital's medical community, and is internationally renowned for its medical and surgical expertise.

If you would like to put any alternative questions on breast cancer to Mr Gerald Gui to appear in print, please contact The London Clinic Press Office on **020 8786 3860** or alternatively email: pressoffice@thelondonclinic.co.uk

For more information about The London Clinic Breast Centre please visit thelondonclinic.co.uk