Breast lumps

Introduction

Breast lumps are very common and most women will experience one or more lumps at some time in her life. Happily, the vast majority (at least nine out of ten) are benign, or not cancerous. These benign lumps can be caused by cysts (sacs of fluid which build up in the breast tissue) or fibroadenomas (solid growths made up of fibrous and glandular tissue).

For more information on breast cancer, see the separate fact sheet.

Diagnosis

If you find a lump in your breast, or notice any other changes such as:

- change in size or shape of your breasts
- dimpling of the skin (skin looks like texture of orange peel)
- lumpiness or thickening
- newly inverted (turned-in) nipple
- bloodstained discharge from nipple
- rash on nipple or surrounding area
- swelling or a lump in the armpit

you must see your doctor straight away. Your GP will examine you and then will arrange for you to have any tests or X-rays you may need at the hospital or specialist clinic. These tests may include

- mammography (X-ray examination of the breasts)
- ultrasound (sound waves are used to create an image of the lump)
- colour doppler (a special type of ultrasound which gives a colour picture showing the blood supply to the lump - tumours often have a very rich blood supply)
- magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) - a scan using a magnetic field to build up a cross-sectional picture of your body,
- needle aspiration; a fine needle and syringe is used to take a sample of cells from the breast lump to send to the laboratory for tests
- core biopsy; a small sample of the breast tissue is taken for examination in the laboratory
- excision biopsy; the lump is removed under general anaesthetic and sent to the laboratory for examination

Treatment

Benign breast lumps do not normally need treatment, although they may be removed as part of the diagnostic process (if the lump is removed for biopsy, for example).

Breast awareness

Early detection of breast cancer is vital as it increases the chance of successful treatment. Women are therefore encouraged to be 'breast aware'. This means knowing how your breasts look and feel and the normal changes that occur at different times of your menstrual cycle. Visit your doctor if you feel a lump, or if one of your breasts changes shape or become constantly painful. There is no need to examine yourself on a strict routine, but it's sensible to look and feel your breasts from time to time. Doing this while showering, bathing or standing in front of a mirror may be convenient.

Breast screening

Breast screening (mammography) is an X-ray examination of the breasts. It can show up abnormalities at an early stage, when they are too small for you or your doctor to feel. A mammogram only takes a few minutes and involves only a small dose of radiation - much less than an X-ray for a broken bone. The health risk is therefore very small. Some women find breast screening uncomfortable as the breasts have to be held firmly in position and compressed for a few seconds in order to take a clear picture. This discomfort is usually passes as soon as the mammogram is over.

However, mammograms are not always 100% accurate so, even you have had a clear X-ray result, if you feel a breast lump, see your doctor at once.

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Further information

National Cancer Institute
http://www.cancer.gov/cancerinfo/understanding-breast-changes/page5

CancerBACUP
www.cancerbacup.org.uk

Breast Cancer Care
Website: www.breastcancercare.org.uk

Healthwise (Health Information Resource Centre)
Tel : (852) 2849 2400
Fax : (852) 2849 2900
Email : info@healthwise.org.hk
Homepage : www.healthwise.org.hk

This leaflet is for information only. For a detailed opinion or personal advice, please consult your own doctor.

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