Know your normal

The signs of breast cancer are not the same for all women. Our bodies are unique, and so is what's normal for our breasts. That's why it's important for each of us to be aware of how our breasts normally look and feel. By noticing if something seems off (and, if we have a partner, encouraging them to do the same), we can take charge of our breast health.

For example, many of us find that our breasts normally feel lumpy–so being told to look for lumps may be confusing. Breast tissue naturally has a bumpy texture, and some women have more lumpiness in their breasts than others.

In most cases, lumpy breast tissue is normal. As long as you feel the lumpiness throughout the breast and your two breasts feel pretty much the same, it's probably healthy breast tissue. The key is to notice lumps that feel harder or different than the rest of the tissue in either breast.

If you or your partner feel or see any change in your breasts or underarm area, talk to a doctor about it asap. It may be a harmless condition like a cyst or fibroadenoma (a non-cancerous breast lump), but it's important to make sure.

Never ignore a change in your breast

When it comes to signs of breast cancer, it's all about noticing changes (and getting them checked out). The three most common signs are:

- A change in the look or feel of the breast
- A change in the look or feel of the nipple
- Nipple discharge that starts suddenly

In most cases, changes you or your partner notice are not cancer. But it's always worth getting checked out anyway. In cases when a change in your breast is a sign of cancer, the sooner the cancer is diagnosed and treated, the better your chance of survival.

Here are some questions to help you know what changes to look for.

Lump, hardening, or thickening

- Do you feel a change in your breast in the form of a lump, hard knot, or a thickening inside the breast or underarm area?
- Does the lump, knot, or thick spot feel different from the tissue in the rest of that breast or the other?
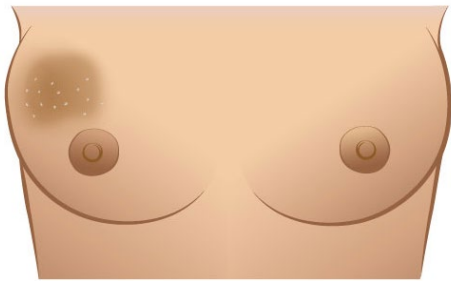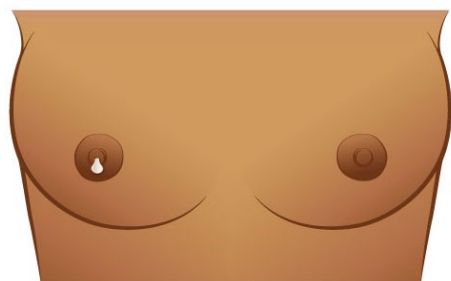
Swelling, warmth, redness, or darkening

- Do your breasts feel swollen?
- Do they feel warm to the touch?
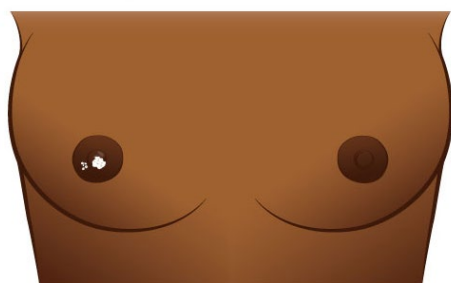- Do you see redness or darkening of the skin?
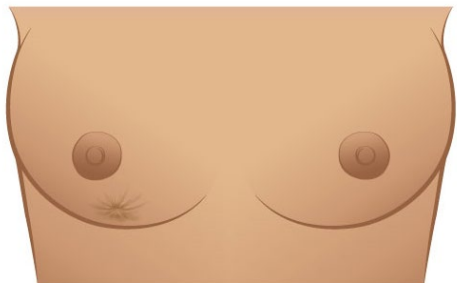
Dimpling or puckering

- Is the skin on or near your breast dimpling or pulling inward?
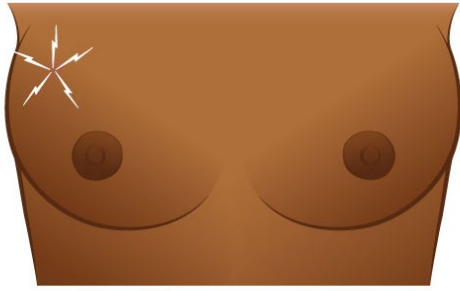- Is the skin on or near your breast puckering or wrinkling?

Discharge

- Is there discharge coming from only one nipple?
- Is there discharge coming out of your nipple without you squeezing it?
- Is the discharge bloody, brown or clear, but not milky?
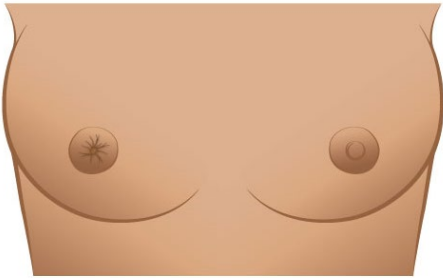
Itchy, scaly sore or rash

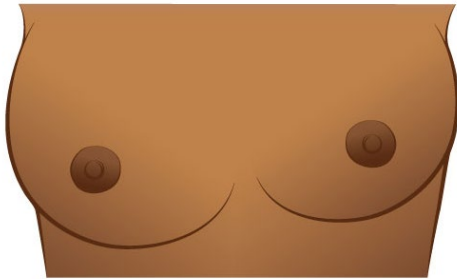- Do you have an itchy, scaly sore or a rash on or around your nipples?

Pain

- Is there pain in or near your breast?
- Is the pain in one spot and not going away?

Pulling in

- Is one of your nipples pulling inward in a way it didn't use to?
- Is the skin of some other part of your breast or around the breast area pulling in?

Change in size or shape

- Have your breasts changed in size?
- Have your breasts changed in shape?

Never ignore a change to your breast, nipple or the skin near your breasts. If you notice any of these changes when you're showering or getting dressed, or if your partner notices something different on or around your breasts, it's a good idea to get checked out by a doctor right away.

While a lump, discharge, or any other change to your breast may be no big deal, consulting with your doctor is the only way to be sure. If the change does turn out to be a big deal, it's best to find out as soon as you can.

Susan G. Komen® offers more information on what to do if you find a lump and questions to ask your health care provider If you find a lump or change.

Knowing your normal, paying attention to changes, and getting checked out if you notice something is a crucial part of breast health--but it's not enough on its own. Here's everything you should know to take charge of your breast health.