



Breast health begins with “knowing your breasts” - how your breasts look and feel and knowing what is normal and what is not for **you**. Knowing your breasts means that you are more likely to pick up changes in your breasts. This is important because healthy breasts translate to a significantly lower risk of developing cancer of the breast and therefore reducing your chances of dying from complications of breast cancer.

Do we need to worry? Yes. [In Kenya, breast cancer is the leading type of cancer, with about 6,000 new cases every year.](#) Statistics from the Ministry of Health suggest that approximately 7 women in Kenya die every day from breast cancer.

No matter how old or young you are breast care should be part and parcel of your daily routine. And it is easy to do! Just follow along with this guide.

What Do Healthy Breasts Look Like?

There are quick ways to reassure yourself that your breasts are healthy. Remember, everyone's breasts look and feel different, so knowing what is normal for you is most important:

- ✓ There is no discharge from the nipples - nipple discharge is uncommon if you are not pregnant or breastfeeding.
- ✓ The skin is clear and even, flat, and free of color or texture changes over time. Inflammatory breast issues can make the skin appear unusually red and bumpy.
- ✓ BOTH breasts are a little lumpy - the keyword is **both**. If you notice a lump in one of the breasts and cannot feel the same lump in the other breast in the same location, then you should have your doctor check it out.
- ✓ They are of the same warmth as the rest of your body - extra warmth or redness of some areas of the breast could point to infections or other breast conditions in both breastfeeding and non-breastfeeding woman.
- ✓ There is no pain. Note however, that some women have breast discomfort around the time that they have their monthly periods, and this is normal.

Other Changes to Look Out For Include

- ✓ Skin irritation or dimpling anywhere on the breast or nipple.
- ✓ Nipple problems. This might be nipple pain, redness, peeling of skin or the nipple may turn inward instead of sticking out.
- ✓ Changes in shape and size e.g., swelling of the entire breast.
- ✓ Firmness in or around the breast.

Breast Cancer: Who is at Risk?

Being female is the biggest risk factor for developing breast cancer. It is important to note, though, that men can get breast cancer since they also have breast tissue. The signs and things to look out for are the same as women.

Other Risk Factors Include

- ✓ Family history of breast cancer-higher risk, particularly if your mother or sister(s) have had breast cancer
- ✓ First menstrual period before age 12
- ✓ Having your first child at 35 years or older
- ✓ Menopause at 55years or older
- ✓ Having no children at all
- ✓ If you are on oral contraceptives popularly known as 'the pill'
- ✓ Smoking and alcohol use, among others



How Can I Keep My Breasts Healthy and Keep Breast Cancer at Bay?

Breast cancer prevention starts with healthy habits. Some risk factors, such as family history, can't be changed. However, lifestyle changes can help to lower your risk.

- ✓ Maintain a healthy body weight. Being overweight can increase the risk of many different cancers, including breast cancer, especially after menopause
- ✓ Make time for regular exercise – women who are physically active for [at least 30 minutes a day](#) have a lower risk of breast cancer
- ✓ Keep alcohol at moderate levels or lower (a drink a day or less)
- ✓ Avoid smoking. Smoking increases the risk of heart disease, stroke, and at least 15 cancers, including breast cancer
- ✓ Talk to your doctor if you are using oral birth control pills for a long time, particularly after age 35 or if you smoke

This information can be overwhelming, but don't panic. Breast cancer is manageable, and better managed if it is picked up early. [Make sure to do monthly breast examinations at home – pick the same day every month, around 7-10 days after your period ends.](#)

In addition, a **clinical breast examination** can be done by a doctor, who feels for breast lumps or other changes. Other options for screening include:

- ✓ **Mammography** - [recommended annually for women above 40 years](#). Mammograms take an X-Ray image of the breast and are good at picking up small breast lumps or those that may not be felt.
- ✓ **Breast MRI** - used exclusively to screen women who are at high risk of getting breast cancer such as those with a strong positive family history of breast cancer.
- ✓ **Breast Ultrasound** - more accurate in women younger than 45 years for evaluation of lumps in the breast.

How Do I Perform a Breast Self-examination?

A self-breast examination can be done in 5 simple steps:

STEP 1 Begin by looking at your breasts in the mirror with your shoulders straight and your arms on your hips. Check that your breasts:

- ✓ Are their usual size, shape, and color?
- ✓ Are evenly shaped without visible distortion or swelling?

If you see any of the changes I described earlier (in What do healthy breasts look/feel like?), bring them to your doctor's attention.

STEP 2 With your arms raised, look for the same changes.

STEP 3 Look for any signs of fluid coming out of one or both nipples (this could be a watery, milky, or yellow fluid or bloody)

STEP 4 Using a circular motion feel your breasts while you are standing up or sitting down. Use your right hand to feel your left breast and then your left hand to feel your right breast. Use a firm, smooth touch with the first few finger pads of your hand, keeping the fingers flat and together and feel for any unusual or new lumps, hardness, soreness.

STEP 5 Repeat **Step 4** above when you are lying down.

Here is an animated resource from the Cancer Association of South Africa that shows you how to perform a self-exam: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ef2RF_9U4c

What do I do with this information?

Remember, every woman's breasts are different in size, look, and feel. The key is to know what's normal for you.

We hope that making the facts about Breast Health, has made prevention and care less amorphous and more accessible to you. A few simple steps go a long way in screening for breast cancer and treating it early, or hopefully reassuring yourself that you are safe.

At HealthX, we believe you should have the power to make the best health and wellness decisions for yourself and your family, not driven by cost or fear, but by what you need. Be it preventive, promotive, curative, or rehabilitative primary health care, we strive to be your constant and trusted partner on your health and wellness journey, and to support you in achieving your dreams and aspirations for yourself and your family. If you have any questions or need any more information about breast health or any health care issues, contact us anytime on our toll-free number **0800 720 795**.

REFERENCES

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