

Breast Cancer Symptoms: What You Need to Know

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An important way to keep up with your breast health is to be aware of how your breasts normally look and feel and know what changes to look for.

Finding breast cancer as early as possible gives you a better chance of successful treatment. But knowing what to look for is not a substitute for screening mammograms and other tests, which can help find breast cancer in its early stages, even before any symptoms appear.

Benign (non-cancerous) breast conditions are much more common than breast cancer, but it is important to let your health care team know about any changes in your breast, so they can be checked out right away.

Below are some common breast symptoms and what they might mean.

A lump in your breast

A lump or mass in the breast is the most common symptom of breast cancer. Such lumps are often hard and painless, though some may be painful. Not all lumps are cancer, though. There are a number of benign breast conditions (like cysts) that can also cause lumps.

Still, it's important to have your doctor check out any new lump or mass right away. If it does turn out to be cancer, the sooner it's diagnosed the better.

Swelling in or around your breast, collarbone, or armpit

Breast swelling can be caused by inflammatory breast cancer, a particularly aggressive form of the disease.

Swelling or lumps around your collarbone or armpits can be caused by breast cancer that has spread to lymph nodes in those areas. The swelling may occur even before you can feel a lump in your breast, so if you have this symptom, be sure to see a doctor.

Skin thickening or redness

If the skin of your breast starts to feel thicker like an orange peel or gets red or scaly, have it checked right away. Often, these are caused by mastitis, a breast infection common among women who are breast feeding. Your doctor may prescribe antibiotics to treat the infection.

If your symptoms don't improve after a week, though, get checked again, because these symptoms can also be caused by inflammatory breast cancer. This form of breast cancer can look a lot like a breast infection, and because it grows quickly it's important to diagnose it as soon as possible.

Breast warmth and itching

Like skin thickening and redness, breast warmth and itching may be symptoms of mastitis – or inflammatory breast cancer. If antibiotics don't help, see your doctor again.

Nipple changes

Breast cancer can sometimes cause changes to how your nipple looks. If your nipple turns inward, or the skin on it thickens or gets red or scaly, get checked by a doctor right away. All of these can be symptoms of breast cancer.

Nipple discharge

A discharge (other than milk) from the nipple may be alarming, but in most cases it is caused by injury, infection, or a benign tumor (not cancer). Breast cancer is a possibility, though, especially if the fluid is bloody, so your doctor needs to check it out.

Pain

Although most breast cancers do not cause pain in the breast, some do. More often, women have breast pain or discomfort that is related to their menstrual cycle. This type of pain is most common in the week or so before their periods, and often goes away once menstruation begins.

Some other benign breast conditions, such as mastitis, may cause a more sudden pain. In these cases, the pain is not related to the menstrual cycle. If you have breast pain that is severe or persists and is not related to the menstrual cycle, you should be checked by your doctor. You could have cancer or a benign condition that needs to be treated.