

# **October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month**

October is National Breast Cancer Awareness Month. Breast cancer is a very real concern for women, especially those with a family history of it. The good thing is that it is treatable in the early stages. Left ignored, it has devastating results.

This should provide more than enough reason for all women to be diligent about performing a simple and private breast self-exam. A physician or qualified health professional should couple the self-examination with an annual breast exam.

A waterproof instruction card that you keep in the shower, such as the one produced by the American Cancer Society, is an excellent reminder to examine yourself on a weekly basis. Gynecologists, hospitals and women's health centers often distribute free waterproof cards. The exam only takes a few minutes in the shower and can be a real life saver. Many women prefer to have their doctor show them the proper examination method, however.

It is easier to examine your breast with a soapy lather on it. This allows your hand to glide smoothly over the skin and helps any unusual lumps to be more noticeable.

Glide the fingertips of the left hand in concentric circles around the right breast, beginning in the outer area near the underarm and continuing until you reach the nipple.

Use one long stroke instead of short broken ones. This will help ensure that you don't miss a spot. Repeat the procedure on the left breast with your right hand.

A normal breast usually feels somewhat lumpy, similar to a soft beanbag. Feel for any lump that feels larger or harder than the others, or feels like there is a hard pea under the skin.

Other symptoms to watch for are any type of leakage from or itching of the nipples, dimpling and any unusual enlargement, shrinkage, indentation or hardness of the breast. Occasionally, a woman's first symptom is swelling in her underarm. This may simply be the result of localized infection, but could indicate a more serious problem.

If you notice any abnormal symptom(s) it is very important you see your physician right away. The doctor should perform a thorough breast examination of both breasts. He or she will then probably order a mammogram (an x-ray of the breasts) to be performed to verify or rule out your suspicions.

The general consensus is that a woman with no symptoms and no family history of breast cancer should have her first mammogram between the ages of 35-40. The American Cancer Society now recommends that mammograms be obtained annually for women 40 years and older.

If you have had symptoms or problems in the past, or if your family history includes breast cancer, discuss a personalized schedule with your doctor for exams and mammograms.