

Breast Cancer Symptoms

In a perfect world, we'd get prior warning when breast cancer was about to occur. An alarm would sound, a red flag would wave or we'd receive a letter in the mail. But the real world, unfortunately, isn't quite so thoughtful.

Early breast cancer presents no outward symptoms. There is no pain, and no warning. In fact, the only means of detected breast cancer in its preliminary stage is by finding a lump or an abnormality. This can be done by performing breast self-examination, or by way of a yearly mammogram.

Most lumps that are found in the breast are not cancerous. However, it is essential to have a doctor examine the lump immediately.

For some women, breast cancer initially presents as a bump under the arm or above the collarbone that doesn't go away. As the disease progresses, other symptoms will appear such as nipple inversion or discharge, or changes to the skin and surface of the breast.

Although rarely a symptom of cancer, discharge from the breast is a common problem. There is greater concern, however, if the discharge is bloody, or occurs in only one breast. A doctor should assess any occurrence of breast discharge. It is also very common for nipples to become inverted; however if this is a sudden occurrence it should be discussed with your doctor.

Swelling or redness in the breast may be an indication of an infection present in the breast tissue. Any infections, regardless of the type or cause, should be treated promptly. See your doctor right away if you notice redness, swelling, or severe pain in your breast, in your armpit, or under your shoulder.

Where breast cancer is present, changes may occur to the skin such as redness, puckering, and changes to texture. There are some skin diseases that may cause a similar effect, however it's important to have a professional consultation to rule out any possibility of cancer.

Breast cancer can take months or even years to develop. Once diagnosed, it's crucial to begin treatment immediately, as it is much more difficult to treat cancer once it has begun to spread throughout the body in what is called metastatic spread.

The earliest signs of breast cancer can be found with a test called a mammogram. This electronic scan of the breast tissue should be performed once per year, particularly for women over 40. Should an abnormality be found on a mammogram, don't panic. Make an appointment with your health care provider immediately for further evaluation, and to give you peace of mind.

In addition to a mammogram, manual examination and ultrasology may also be used to detect abnormalities. A complete physical examination of the breast includes a visual inspection and palpitation, including the armpits and areas around the collarbone. Your healthcare provider may palpate for a lump or feel for a thickening in the skin. A biopsy, where a piece of the lump or tissue is removed, is the only definite method to test the cells and provide a positive diagnosis.

It's imperative that women are aware of the symptoms of breast cancer:

- * A lump in the breast, above the collarbone or under the arm, that stays for longer than a week
- * Nipple discharge
- * Changes to the nipples, such as inversion
- * Changes to the skin surface of the breast

Don't take chances with your health. If you notice any of these breast cancer symptoms, see your doctor right away.