

When You Discover a Lump

What to do when you discover a breast lump: A step-by-step guide

1. I've found a lump. Now what?

First of all, do not panic. Eight out of ten breast lumps are *not* cancerous. Breast lumps are actually very common, especially in premenopausal women. They normally vary with and go away by the end of the menstrual cycle. But do not ignore a change in your breast, either. The best advice is to see a doctor.

2. What will a doctor do?

The doctor should begin by asking about your personal and family medical history and about what you are feeling or seeing in your breast. Help your doctor by showing exactly where you noticed the change. A doctor can tell a lot about a lump from its size, texture and the way it moves within the breast. Benign (non-cancerous) lumps often feel different from cancerous lumps.

3. Will I need a needle aspiration?

Sometimes an abnormal lump is a liquid-filled sac called a *cyst*. Doctors can collapse these cysts by inserting a very thin needle and drawing out the fluid. This is called a needle aspiration and can be done in a doctor's office. It is generally not painful because the breast is numb. Only rarely do cysts contain cancer cells.

If the cyst does not collapse all the way, or if the fluid in the cyst contains blood, the doctor may examine the cells and fluid from the cyst with a microscope. Based on what is found, your doctor may order a follow-up mammogram, ultrasound or a biopsy.

4. What about a diagnostic mammogram or ultrasound?

A mammogram is an X-ray picture of the breast. A diagnostic mammogram is used to evaluate lumps or changes in the breast. It includes more views of your breast than a screening mammogram.

Ultrasound is another way of looking inside the breast by using sound waves instead of X-rays. It can tell the difference between a liquid-filled cyst and a solid mass. It can help to tell the difference between normal and abnormal breast lumps. It is often used in addition to a mammogram when evaluating breast lumps.

These tests give one of three results:

- the breast change is nothing to worry about; return to regular clinical breast exams, and yearly mammograms if you are over 40
- the abnormal tissue is probably not cancer, but return for a re-check in 4 to 6 months or see a surgeon for a second opinion
- a biopsy is needed to tell whether or not the breast change is cancer

5. Will I need a biopsy?

If the breast change turns out to be a solid lump, a procedure called a *biopsy* might be needed to remove a small portion of tissue. The tissue is examined under a microscope to see if it is cancer. A *needle biopsy* will usually tell your doctor whether or not you have cancer. However, there is a small chance that the biopsy needle could miss the suspicious area. If any doubt remains, surgical biopsy may be needed to determine if any cancer cells are present. If the lump turns out to be a benign tumor or cyst, then it is not cancer.

6. What happens next?

If it is not cancer, your condition may be one of several natural changes the breast undergoes over time. Your doctor will probably recommend that you have a mammogram every year (if you are 40 or older), have regular clinical breast exams and do monthly breast self-exams.

If the biopsy showed cells that were not cancer but were not completely normal, you may have a condition that increases your chance of getting cancer. In this case, you would need to have clinical breast exams more often. You may also want to talk with your doctor about breast cancer prevention options.

If the breast change is cancer, your doctor will talk with you about treatment choices.

Resources

Organizations

Susan G. Komen for the Cure
1-877 GO KOMEN
www.komen.org

National Cancer Institute's Cancer Information Service
1-800-4 CANCER
www.cancer.gov

American Cancer Society
1-800-ACS-2345
www.cancer.org

Internet

University of Pennsylvania Cancer Center
www.oncolink.upenn.edu

Book

Dr. Susan Love's Breast Book, 4th ed., by Susan M. Love with Karen Lindsey. 2005 (Addison-Wesley).

If your doctor finds nothing, but you still feel something is wrong, it is a good idea to get a second opinion. It is wiser to contact another doctor than to worry.

Related fact sheets in this series:

- Benign Breast Changes
- Mammography
- Biopsy