

Post Mastectomy Self-exam

What Women with Mastectomies Need to Know

If you have had a mastectomy, you know a lot about breast cancer already.

You may know that even after treatment, some cancers can recur near the area where they were first discovered. So if you have had a mastectomy, it is in your best interest to look for any changes in the area where your breast was removed.

Detecting cancer early is important, because treatments at an early stage can be more effective.

What is a Post-Mastectomy Self-exam?

A post-mastectomy self-exam is a personal, physical check of your mastectomy area. It can be done in private, on your own schedule. The post-mastectomy self-exam should be followed by a self-exam of your other breast. If you have had a double mastectomy, you can still benefit by examining yourself for any abnormalities in the areas where your surgery was performed.

Take Your Time

Taking time during your self-exam will make it easier to become familiar with your body, and to notice any changes should they occur.



How Often Should I Perform my Self-Exam?

Because early detection is important, National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN) recommends that you should perform a self-exam every month.

The ideal time for a self-exam is seven to 10 days after the first day of your menstrual cycles, you can perform your self-exam at any time, but make it the same day of the month.

If you are pregnant, breast feeding, have a breast implant or have had breast reconstruction, consult your health care provider about performing a self-exam.

How do I Perform my Self-exam?

Your self-exam will only take a few minutes, but it is best to choose a time when you have a little privacy and will not be disturbed.

Just Follow These Steps:

1. First, stand in front of a well-lit mirror. If you cannot stand comfortably, you can do this part sitting down. Look at your chest, mastectomy area and underarm in the mirror.

You will be looking for:

- A persistent rash or irritation in the area of your scar
- Signs of swelling
- Lumps (note their size)
- Skin thickening
- Redness or color changes

2. Check the surgical scar, using a little skin cream or lotion on your fingers

to make them more sensitive. Move your three middle fingers together using light, medium and deep pressures. Cover all the area from the line where your blouse seam would fall (midaxillary line), to the bra line, the breastbone (sternum) and collarbone (clavicle).

Your Best Defense

Early detection is important, because treatments are more effective when cancers are small.



3. Check above and below the collarbone. Feel for any pea- or bean-sized lumps or any thickening.
4. Check for lumps or thickening under your arm while relaxing your arm at your side. Reach across with your other hand to feel the area. Check deeply up and down the inside of the armpit, and up and forward toward your chest. Note any changes from previous self-exams.

You will be feeling for:

- Any new or unusual swelling
- New lumps or bumps
- Thickening
- Rashes
- Soreness

When you are finished with your post-mastectomy self-exam, you should do a breast self-exam on your other breast.

If you have had a double mastectomy, simply repeat the post-mastectomy self-exam on the other side of your chest.



What if I Find Something?

Finding a lump or a change does not necessarily mean you have cancer. However, you should report any changes promptly to your health care provider.

Tell Your Doctor

Notify your health care provider if you notice any changes in your post-mastectomy area, or your other breast.



What if I Find Nothing?

Continue to do your self-exams monthly. Also, continue with your regularly scheduled medical appointments. And be sure to tell your health care provider immediately if you notice any changes around your mastectomy, or in your other breast.

City of Hope Post-Mastectomy Self-exam.
City of Hope™, 2018.