

Breast Self-Examination

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The purpose of a breast self-examination (BSE) is to allow the woman to become familiar with her breast tissue and to note any changes in this tissue over time. The examiner should emphasize that most breast abnormalities found on BSE are benign, but that early detection of a mass by BSE may identify tumors at more treatable stages and reduce the amount of surgery needed ([Reichman](#)).

From Reichman BS: Textbook and atlas: clinical breast examination and instruction of patients in breast self-examination. In Wallis LA, ed: Textbook of women's health, Philadelphia, 1998, Lippincott-Raven. BSE has the added benefit of allowing women to become more aware of their bodies and take responsibility for their breast health. Women should be taught how the breast changes with age and during the menstrual cycle. The best time for a woman to examine her breasts is at one of the following regular intervals: At the end of her menstrual cycle if she has them On the last day off hormones if she is receiving cyclic hormone replacement therapy (HRT) On the first day of each month if she is postmenopausal and not taking HRT ([Wallis](#))

From Reichman BS: Textbook and atlas: clinical breast examination and instruction of patients in breast self-examination. In Wallis LA, ed: Textbook of women's health, Philadelphia, 1998, Lippincott-Raven. This consistent timing may increase her ability to detect changes. The BSE is performed with the woman sitting or standing and then lying down. The woman should stand before a mirror to inspect her breasts. Again, she should inspect with her hands at her sides, then overhead, then on her hips. Palpation is best accomplished with the woman in the bath or shower where her fingers will glide easily over the breast tissue. She should be instructed to use any pattern she chooses so that she covers all the breast tissue, including the area from nipple to axilla. She should also palpate her breasts when lying flat. In this position the breast tissue is distributed more evenly on the chest wall making palpation easier. Although many women avoid BSE because of their fear of detecting a lump, most lumps are not cancerous. Indeed, women should be informed that the major purpose of BSE is to allow them to become comfortable with the feel of their breasts ([Carlson](#)). There are no good data suggesting that BSE as a solo screening tool reduces mortality from breast cancer. Therefore, BSE should be used as a low-stress, low-cost adjunct to other modalities.