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Breast Cancer Self-Exams: Are They Necessary?

Breast cancer self-exams have been the subject of some debate, but experts say they're still an important part of early detection

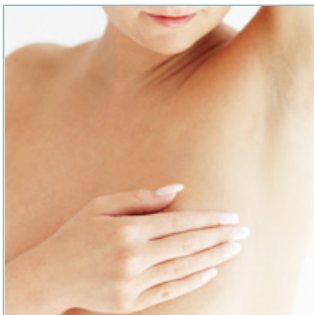
By Gina Roberts-Grey

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When Wendy Owens found a lump in her breast one morning, she knew it was breast cancer. The 41-year-old wife and mother from Lanexa, Virginia, says: "I had never felt anything like that before. It was just like a frozen pea." Owens next asked her husband for his opinion. "When I saw the look on his face, I knew it was what I originally thought." A doctor's visit the next day led to a mammogram, ultrasound, needle biopsy, and then a diagnosis of a stage-one tumor, the earliest, most curable form of breast cancer.

Radiation and a lumpectomy followed. Owens, who is now cancer-free, is currently in the midst of a five-year course of tamoxifen, a drug that blocks the actions of the hormone estrogen, which can stimulate the growth of some breast cancers. "My surgeon and radiologist both commented that I was very lucky to find my lump so early," says Owens.

While Owens also has regular mammograms, she has been performing routine self-exams since her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. "My mother is a 20-year breast cancer survivor, and *her* mother lost her fight with breast cancer in 1961. Both were in their 40s when they had cancer, so my sister and I have been very aware of our risk — even though genetic testing showed we're negative for the known mutations."

Why Do Breast Self-Exams?

In the past few years, several organizations — including the American Cancer Society, the World Health Organization, and the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force — have modified their recommendations for self-screening breast exams or have stopped short of recommending them at all. And a recently published review in the medical literature that looked at large-scale clinical trials also concluded that routine self-examination does not decrease the number of breast cancer deaths — but try and convince Owens of that. "If I hadn't found my lump, it might have been months before my cancer was detected at my next mammogram," she says, "and by that time, my cancer could have been much worse or have spread."

"There are a number of controversial statements regarding breast self-exams floating around the medical community these days due to recent studies," says Virginia Kaklamani, MD, assistant professor in the Division of Hematology/Oncology at Northwestern University and oncologist at Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago, Illinois. "But self-exams are a very important part of a woman's arsenal against breast cancer."

One reason, according to Dr. Kaklamani: "A woman who performs regular breast self-exams will become proficient at knowing her own breasts and thus may detect a change earlier than her doctor." This is especially important for women whose breasts normally feel lumpy. "Women with lumpy breasts who perform regular breast self-exams will be better able to detect subtle and significant changes," Kaklamani says.

And while regular yearly mammograms are highly effective at saving lives, they're not perfect.

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According to Dorothy Pierce, RN, an advanced practice nurse at the Cancer Institute of New Jersey in New Brunswick, "Mammography has a sensitivity of 80 percent; therefore, a significant number of cancers will go undetected with mammography alone."

When to Do Breast Self-Exams

Is it ever too late to start doing breast cancer self-exams? "As the saying goes, better late than never," says Kaklamani.

Breast cancer self-exams should be done once every month if you're premenopausal and having regular menstrual cycles. The best time is on the seventh to tenth day of your cycle because that's when your breasts are the least tender, lumpy, or swollen due to hormonal changes. Postmenopausal women and women with irregular cycles should choose a day they're likely to remember, such as the first of the month or the date that's the same as their birthday. Women with breast implants should also perform monthly breast self-examinations.

There is no special time of day to check your breasts, but Pierce suggests doing it in the shower. "Your hands are soapy and this might help you better detect changes. Once you're out of the shower, don't forget to look in the mirror for any breast changes such as dimpling, puckering, skin thickening, swelling, or retraction."

The Bottom Line on Breast Self-Exams

According to doctors, early detection is a woman's best chance to beat breast cancer. And, says Pierce, "Early detection is best achieved through a combination of annual mammography, annual clinical breast exams [by a health-care professional], and monthly breast self-exams."

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