

When You Discover a Lump or Change

A step-by-step guide:

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

First of all, do not panic. Most 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 any 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. Can fluid be removed? Or if I have a cyst, will fluid be removed?

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. Cysts rarely 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.

5. What about MRI?

Magnetic resonance image (MRI) uses a large magnet and radio waves to create an image of the breast. It can sometimes detect cancers in dense breasts that are not seen on mammograms. MRI is often used with mammography for screening women at a high risk of breast cancer.

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 benign breast conditions. While benign breast conditions are not cancer, some may increase the risk of breast cancer. Your doctor may recommend additional follow-up and will advise that you have a mammogram every year (if you are 40 or older), and have regular clinical breast exams.

If you do have breast cancer, your doctor will talk with you about treatment choices.

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.

Resources

Organizations

Susan G. Komen for the Cure®
1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636)
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



Related fact sheets in this series:

- Biopsy
- Benign Breast Changes
- Breast Imaging Methods
- Mammography