

BREAST CHECK-IN

With Breast Cancer Awareness month upon us, it's time to get clued up on all the signs and symptoms

When we think of self-care we tend to think of facials, yoga or taking a candlelit bath. But we should think about our health, too, and checking your breasts definitely needs to be on the list.

With Breast Cancer Awareness month upon us, there's no better time to add checking your breasts to your self-care routine. A regular check could mean any abnormalities get picked up quickly and lead to a speedier diagnosis.

"Checking your breasts only takes a few minutes and it could be when you're getting dressed, showering or putting on moisturiser," says Addie Mitchell, clinical nurse specialist at Breast Cancer Now. "There's no special way. It's as simple as TLC: touch, look, check. And remember to check the whole breast and surrounding area including the upper chest and armpits."

Breast cancer is the UK's most common female cancer – around 55,000 women are diagnosed with it every year and one in seven will develop the disease in their lifetime. Eight out of ten cases are diagnosed in women over 50, while only 4% of cases occur in women aged 39 or under.

However, your age is no reason to delay those DIY checks.

"The earlier you start, the more likely you are to be able to recognise what is normal for you and if there is anything unusual," says Jacqueline Lewis, consultant breast surgeon at Bupa Cromwell Hospital in London. "Once you're over 50, you'll be invited for a breast screening mammogram every three years until you're 70. However, you should still check your breasts regularly. A mammogram shouldn't replace your own checks."

DON'T DELAY

Unfortunately, the last few months have seen a drop in the number of women going to their GPs with concerns about their breasts due to fears over Covid-19.

"NHS England figures from April showed that there was a 57% drop in the number of women being referred by a GP with suspected breast cancer at the peak of the pandemic compared with last April," Addie says. "While the numbers are starting to recover, we're still some way from them returning to what we would normally expect."

Experts think that the case of former Girls Aloud star Sarah Harding (above right), who in August told fans she had been diagnosed with stage two breast cancer, might help raise awareness of the need for self-checks.

"With increasing exposure and instant access to information and opinions through social media, the internet and video streaming, stories of celebrities affected by cancers will be heard more and be harder to ignore," says Dr Daniel Vorobiof of Belong.Life, whose new app Belong – Beating Cancer Together aims to connect patients going through the same treatments and experiences. "Every breast

cancer story is important and that's why it's so relevant for celebrities to speak out because people gravitate towards them. They have the power to create awareness and action, which was proven when Kylie Minogue publicly discussed her breast cancer diagnosis. Studies published after showed a significant increase in mammography bookings."

Kylie is not the only one to have opened up about her diagnosis: Sheryl Crow, Olivia Newton-John and Anne and Linda Nolan have talked about living with the disease in a bid to encourage people to act, turning their illnesses into something positive by shining the spotlight on what to look out for and what to do.

WHAT'S NORMAL AND WHAT'S NOT

Everyone's breasts are different and everybody will display different symptoms, which is why it's so important to get acquainted with your own.

If you're menstruating, a week after your period is the best time to check your breasts, though you'll know during your cycle when they feel tender or heavy, and they'll change through pregnancy and menopause; but any abnormality should be questioned.

Naturally, your first thoughts will go to lumps and bumps, but there are other signs of cancer to be aware of. Nipple discharge, dimpling or puckering of the skin, a swelling in the armpit or collarbone, redness or flaky skin in the nipple area, a change in size or shape of the breast and pain in any area are all signs you should book an appointment with your GP. While it may not be cancer – cysts and benign tumours can also cause lumps in your breast – it's always best to err on the side of caution and get them checked professionally.

There are also various types and stages of breast cancer that can be identified from where they form, says Jacqueline. "For example, in the ducts or the tissue and whether they are invasive or non-invasive."

"Invasive breast cancer is the most common form of breast cancer, which means the cancer cells have grown through the lining of the ducts and into the breast tissue."

In addition, there are primary and secondary breast cancer, phrases used to describe how far

the cancer has spread. Primary means the cancer won't have spread beyond the breast or lymph nodes, while secondary means cells are being affected in other parts of the body, such as the lungs, liver, bones or brain. Cancer can be treated and managed at this stage, but cannot be eradicated.

TREATMENT OPTIONS

While chemotherapy is the treatment most commonly associated with cancer, surgery, radiotherapy, hormone therapy and targeted therapy can also be used. In addition, there has been a move towards incorporating immunotherapy, which boosts the body's natural defences, for some.

"Doctors specialising in different areas of cancer

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treatments will work together with radiologists and pathologists to create a patient's overall treatment plan," says Daniel. "A variety of other healthcare professionals such as oncology nurses, pharmacists, councillors and nutritionists may also be involved."

Due to the combination of treatments and earlier detection and diagnosis, survival rates of breast cancer are improving and have doubled in the last 40 years in the UK. Almost nine in ten women now survive breast cancer for five years or more after their diagnosis, with 75% surviving for ten years or more.

The emphasis really is on swift action in the first stages.

"The sooner breast cancer is diagnosed, the more likely treatment is to be successful," says Addie. "Anyone concerned about a potential symptom can call Breast Cancer Now's free helpline on 0808 800 6000, where our expert nurses are at the end of the phone."



A HELPING HAND

◆ On 23 October, do your bit and Wear It Pink – add a pink piece to your outfit to raise money for Breast Cancer Now. To find out more, register and donate, visit wearitpink.org.
◆ Find out how to check your

breasts with Breast Cancer UK's new video. To watch it, visit breastcanceruk.org.uk.
◆ Boots has teamed up with Macmillan Cancer Support to offer free virtual consultations, help and support to those suffering with or who have

questions about cancer. The service can be accessed by smartphone for people who are shielding or would prefer not to visit a clinic at this time, or you can call the Macmillan Support Line free on 0808 8080 000.